

Beyond Contact

by RiptideZ

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Summary: The Human-Covenant War has ended; it has been two years and the recovery effort continues. In 2555, the UNSC Alexander, a destroyer, is tasked to provide security for a Naval Intelligence operation, the Alexander and her crew become stranded, far from Earth, in a region of space populated by an unknown civilization that forces the crew to question Mankind's place among the stars.

1. Flashpoint

****Hey guys, I know this story is overdue, I've been working on chapter one for nearly a year now. I'm sure this is final now, I don't feel like going back anymore. I just want to thank everyone that stayed around this long to read this story. You guys are awesome and remember read and review. Also, I would mention, I need a beta. There are canon and plot errors that are going to get to me quickly. If anyone can help, please PM me.****

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><p>Welcome to RiptideZ's "Beyond Contact" a non-profit fan-produced fiction product under the ownership of set penname: RiptideZ.**

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"_For too many years, humanity was on the back-foot, reacting to threats, rather than preventing them. The rest of the galaxy was bigger than us, stronger than us. We were mice hiding in the shadows, hoping the giants would not see us. No more. Humanity is no longer on the defense. We are the giants now." _â€" Commander Thomas J. Lasky (2510-Present), during the christening ceremony of the UNSCS Infinity

â€|

["Flashpoint"]

[SGT Gary "Heart" Hartmann, UNSC Army]

[September 2555]

[Former Colony of Aragon, Glasslands]

â€|

"Crockett, you're green light to engage."

"Copy Sunshine; you heard him. Weapons free, and get too your feet Pedy before I light your rump with kerosene." Crockett, a squad leader with a British accent stated across the radio feed.

Among the semi-Earth like flora that covered the region, two decently armed men lay hidden within a hemisphere-shaped bush. The branches were quite thin to the point where you could see out yet the occupants within could remain hidden. Unnoticed at a first glance, the metallic flash hider of a UNSC anti-material rifle stuck out of the brush next to an oak green targeting scope.

Sergeant Gary "Heart" Hartmann gripped his sniper rifle as he watched the group of army troops run through the underbrush. Their IFF tags lit them up as a dull green through the thick of trees below. He moved to watch the bright red silhouettes of Jiralhaneae soldiers, commonly called Brutes by humans.

Taking his eyes off the scope as the troopers of Crockett's squad moved closer toward the enemies highlighted in red, Gary glanced at his Commanding Officer, Master Sergeant Quinn "Sunshine" Silva; his face was covered by a charcoal gray face piece and black visor reflecting a distorted self-portrait of Gary and his surroundings. Gary could not see his eyes yet Sunshine's body language was rigid and concentrated at best. He was focused exclusively on the people below.

Following his CO's example, Gary looked back toward the conflict through his precise and electronically enhanced weapon scope.

"Two Bravo Kilos, one has a golf club, do you acknowledge?" Crockett asked.

"We acknowledge Crockett." Sunshine stated.

In the distance, four low-rhythm cracks were heard as the Brutes' bodies fell to the soft earth with their red and poke-a-dotted blue blood splattered across the greenery. The sound of the semi-automatic fire of MA5D assault rifles was synonyms to thunder at this distance upon Gary's eardrum.

The 12 man squad moved from location to location, two at a time, toward a darker and shadowy group of trees clustered near their former position of boulders and large rocks.

Looking from the soldiers, Gary addressed a radius of 30 meters from the group of soldiers searching for more Brutes. He found nothing yet took a shallow, half-second breath in case he was wrong and had to react quickly.

"Heart, Brute Pack Leader to the left; he's 40 meters from Crockett's 12 o'clock and five meters to the left." Sunshine stated.

Gary lined his crosshairs to the direction that Sunshine had stated and no truer to his word was a single Brute stalking the area, no doubt smelling the Army squad not too far from his position. The Brute also looked on edge his plasma rifle was out and his breathing seemed abnormally faster than usual. The space gorilla walked toward the dead bodies of his former comrades and turning around in a circular motion every so often.

"Got him in sights, you're green to fire. Burn that son of a gun!" Sunshine stated as he marked the enemy in a brighter red outline, a scarlet red that was impossible to miss in the darker blues and greens of the surrounding forest.

Gary without missing a beat guided his finger to the trigger house and prepared his shot; the sniper scope automatically zeroed his target and locked on the alien's head, a metallic-black helmet with a single menacing dim red eye for a visor. It was commonly dubbed Cyclops by humans for its horror-instilling design, common to all Brute militant states. The power armor of the former Covenant was effective and menacing.

Gary's crosshairs turned an antonymic green comparing to the red hue of the Brute as Gary's previous shallow breath was replaced with a deep exhale. He pulled the trigger and the loud crack of a 14.5 millimeter round exiting the barrel was heard, the familiar punch of recoil impacted Gary's shoulder, cushioned by the breath he had taken.

Through his scope he saw the round meet its mark. The Brutes head was now splattered brain jelly, covered in gray skin, bodily fur, and spilled blood as its corpse hit the dirt, a smack Gary thought he heard from nearly half a kilometer away.

"Target down, what do you think?" Gary asked Sunshine without making eye contact.

"Could have been better," Sunshine stated without delay. "Shot could have traveled a little farther if you had taken in account for the breeze."

"Oh, I'd like to see you do better, ball-sack." Gary replied

annoyed.

"Yeah and I would do better; I don't have to rely on computer as much as you do," Sunshine said surveying the surroundings. "Computers aren't perfect."

"And when were people any better?" Gary asked sarcastically.

"Theyâ€¦ fuck it, never mind, focus on the task at hand." Sunshine stated somewhat aggressively.

Returning back to his normal persona, he stated into his microphone, "Baby Kong is down, you can move forward, Crockett."

Gary also put away the argument for another time. He was technically begging for puke when he asked for opinions.

Crockett's group below moved along not acknowledging any aggressive banter, probably because they never heard the conversation at all.

Stepping toward the thicker tree line where the underbrush made it impossible to see through, Crockett and his squad of Great War veterans formed a full circle defensive line as their squad leader rechecked their situation through the radio and electronically available combat data.

The soldiers were dressed in standard issue combat uniforms of carbon-fiber patches microscopically secured in hexagonal and quadrilateral shapes of tan and wilted plant green that faded well with the foggy and humid air of the temperate evergreen forest. Their faces were masked by face masks similar to Sunshine's and Gary's yet they wore metal brown helmets unlike the metallic caps and hoods worn by Gary and Sunshine.

"We're across; do you have us in sight?" Crockett asked across the radio.

"We have you, though you probably figured this out, but, we won't be able to cover you in that mess." Sunshine stated. "You're on your own, acknowledge?"

"Copy that, we acknowledge." Crockett replied as he twirled his fingers in the air to rally his men. He motioned again to his squad and they moved down and out of sight.

The radio became quiet and the forest's temperance finally got to him. The echoed squawks of migratory swamp birds were heard in the distance adjourned with far away gunfire. Gary took the bipod extensions and turned them back to face parallel to the rifle barrel.

Climbing up and out of the hemispherical bush like a baby bird breaking through its shell for the first time, Gary stretched his muscles from the rigid position he had lay in for the past 6 hours. Having been through enough combat tours and life-risking situations, he was well aware of the risks he was taking. He watched out of the corner of his eye as Sunshine copied his motions.

The humid air passed through his bodysuit's filters providing him with cool air as if he was under dim shade. Gary appreciated the feeling as he rarely got to enjoy his surroundings when visiting other colonies when on combat tours. He was usually too busy fighting enemies or being cramped up onboard starships.

Overhead, the sound of distant gunfire and thunder echoed through the luminescent blue and green evergreen pines. Gary noted how the region did not seem to be affected by the alien presence and fighting that occurred within and around. It was like the forest had its own little bubble as if the colony itself felt content to sleep away the violence. Gary appreciated the peace, if anything, he probably just drop dead right there, he would much like to spend the rest of eternity a rock then a soldier constantly in combat. War took a toll on the body.

Now that his task of the day was over, at least until command decided they were needed on the frontlines again. He and Sunshine would likely retreat to Hellhound, a Forward Operating Base acting as central command for the army until the Covenant beast was terminated.

Suddenly, Gary smelled a strange odor, something salty and unclean. An animal-like smell strong enough to pass his suits filters. Within seconds of the odor, his HUD lit up and his scanners picked up a large heat signature bounding toward him and Sunshine. Gary's back hairs stood on end, and his body reacted upon instinct. "Move!" He yelled as a large ceremonial Gravity Hammer smashed into the ground between them as they dived in opposite, corresponding directions.

Clear of the bush and his sniper bouncing uncontrollably across his thigh, Gary whipped out his Armalite MG M6C, a suppressed special operations pistol that served him well throughout the Great War and beyond.

He pulled the trigger twice and quick bird chirps that harmlessly bounced off the apparent Brute Chieftain's ceremonial armor. The space gorilla wore a radically different costume compared to his modern soldiers who dressed head to toe in combat power suits. This beast wore clothed drapes, a thin black body suit under large bulky armor with exposed light brown skin, likely a desert born.

He hit the dirt with an apparent ache in his stomach, the split-second change in G-forces made him want to vomit.
"Fuckâ€¦!"

Turning to face the Brute as he prepared another charge, deciding to turn his back to Gary and open his hammer on the fleeting and blurry form of Sunshine retreating to a large fallen tree of apparent importance.

Gary was quick to react even with his slipping motor controls. He shockingly opened up his pistol in his right hand. He took aim at the silver and brown back of the alien and pulled the trigger. He could not tell if his rounds made impact yet they obviously had an effect. The beast let out a loud slippery mess between a purr and a scream. It quickly turned around to face Gary.

As Gary fumbled with his pistol to draw two more suppressed pistol

shots likely to have hit their mark, he watched the imposing and large figurative shadow blacken his vision. He thought about his life. All he remembered was the Great War and the people and places he met and stepped foot at. He gladly handed himself to the great void. If he was to die by the hand of a beast, he would surely do it in pride.

He fumbled his left hand toward his belt as the Chieftain stepped up into his five meter radius and spun the ceremonial weapon with precision, it came down to clobber him as it twisted in its muscular grip. He found a grenade and prepared to twist the cap even with his still swimmy vision.

Time slowed to a halt as Gary closed around the knob and pressure button. Suddenly, the thunderous sound of a buzz saw ripped through the air. The alien was bringing his weapon down from his left shoulder and was sent flying completely missing Gary.

Its body collapsed next to him as his sight became foggy for a second. It wasn't as blurry or swimmy like before. Now he just failed to see around him. He felt like vomiting and his body excessively pumping adrenaline into his veins. Sunshine's approaching image was semi-clear. He held a large metal object with a smoking rod tip.

A cylindrical magazine was located in the middle. A M739 SAW held by Sunshine had saved his life and Gary felt nothing. He had been in these situations before. He knew the feeling of death gripping him yet every time was unexpected. He had been through so much, yet every instance was a new experience. Later he would probably speak his thanks to Sunshine; right now he was too busy collecting himself.

Sunshine began to inspect the body. He poked it in the foot, and then he poked it between the legs. Might Gary say, harshly? It did not budge. On the ground, Gary's vision finally cleared up. He felt beyond tired and felt he would drop into unconsciousness at any moment, a feeling akin to an aftershock of swimming none stop in a tropical depression for several hours.

Around Gary were splattered blood of the Brute, jellified body parts, and not a single bullet shell. Weapons since the 23rd century were electronically fired. No more gun powder. There was only the smell of rotten flesh. Gary saw the crater of the sniper bush, a war-torn nest. The sniper rifle next to his leg remained unscratched and his body was muddled but still functioning. Sunshine silently walked up to him and held out a hand.

His body was covered in some stomach parts and monkey blood. Gary quickly wiped it off.

Gary grabbed the hand and pulled himself up. Sunshine took his other hand off his secured machine gun and grabbed another metal frame, a UNSC carbine, the MA9B-ECP.

Gary put his pistol back into its container and locked it with a secure Velcro strap. He handed over his sniper rifle for the fresh carbine and hooked it on to his bodysuit. Sunshine took a case off his back and put the sniper rifle in alongside the noticeable extra magazines and team support sight.

He locked the case and roped it around his neck. He turned to Gary and asked: "Ready?"

"Ready."

The storm overhead distantly flashed with lightning, a sign for coming rain and darker omens.

Gary watched as a group of indistinguishable aircraft battled each other, their colors and designs were too distant to make out, they were simply black dots dancing out in the distance and only truly noticeable when Gary squinted. They were barely visible upon the coal, gray palette of the sky.

A nearby whistling hiss echoed through the trees, a predator on the prowl. To the two soldiers, it was a sign of more enemies.

"We need to move now." Sunshine said.

"Then we're thinking the same thing."

Jogging along the cliff line sloppily as the wet grass slide their soles across the ground creating unnecessary noise and uncomfortably scampering men, they came across a leveled 90 degree slope that dropped 25 meters below them. At their feet were well hidden and well secured ropes that were nailed into the steep rise that made sliding or walking down the hill near impossible.

"Charges are ready, right?" Sunshine asked looking toward Gary.

"Ummâ€¦ yes."

Gary took note of how the stupid question had exited the unknown depths that were Sunshine's mind; Sunshine had watched him construct his elaborate trap nearly eight hours ago. He shrugged the mental pest and let it fly by. It would likely come back to bite him on the nose, after all he had known Sunshine for quite a while and that tended to be his nature.

"Anything without a friendly IFF tracker will be blown sky high by a collection of six IEDs, 14 C-12 shaping charge explosives, a bottle of highly flammable motor oil, and a whole lot of tree branches to spread the fire and hide the tech. Sound like enough?"

"Good. Alright swing down, Sergeant." Sunshine took a leaping bound off the cliff. Gary had been too busy thinking about his moronic question that he likely knew the answer too.

Another loud and distance hissing erupted through the trees, seconds followed before two more joined in a continuous harmony. Gary only had so little time to register Sunshine's dangerous and erratic behavior, he locked his rappel hook to the line and slowly began to rappel down the cliff, his face faced skyward in comparison to Sunshine's face first attack upon the earth.

As he reached the bottom, Gary had his mind modify the motion detector range to 500 meters, fuzzy, dimly-lit cyan dots got ever closer to the two yellow dots that represented the pair of soldiers at the center of his own reality.

They moved in toward their previous location, likely following scent alone, toward the well placed and hidden base of explosives at their previous hideaway so rudely damaged by the dead Brute leader.

"Possible tangos, 300 meters and closing on trap, we should move." Gary stated to Sunshine as he cut the bond of his cable with a carbon-fiber-reinforced polymer blade, an almost exact similarity to the two's exoskeleton bodysuits.

"Alright, I'm ready to move." Sunshine stated. "I work well under pressure, so this isn't that big of a deal."

Gary was already starting to question his earlier thought about saying his thanks. This man was obviously out of his mind. He let the thought go and followed the now mobile figure of Sunshine running through the woods.

He cut the chatter and allowed the silence to envelope him. Gary kept track of the enemies, constantly looking at the locked heat tracer at 500 meters. Gary recognized four dots coming from the west and 12 coming from the north. They were obviously not normal predators; no native species in these woods were known to move like that. Only a familiar and exceedingly vicious ape-man species could move like that.

Highlighted in a deep purple was the locations of the explosives' nest.

The enemy was closing in and unconsciously, Gary reached for an explosive switch, a safety measure incase the trap failed to blow and Gary was hoping he would not have to use it. He knew that the hardware he installed to set the trip mine was faulty; he hoped no one would realize that his supposed knowledge on explosive weaponry was near nothing.

Gary watched the monitor as the enemies got closer, correspondingly providing better data on the enemies as they approached. He noted their time pace and their general pattern of direction. They moved in a steady and fast forward charge heading right into a trap. Then again, Brutes were not known for being cunning.

12 seconds and they were 50 meters away from the trap, their light blue markers lit up a bright scarlet red deducing that the groups were enemies; their numbers had dropped nimbly from 16 unknowns down to 12 likely hostiles.

13 seconds, they were within 40 meters.

14 seconds past and they were within the firing distance of the explosives. The hissing got louder and then finally stopped abruptly.

He waited for half a second, the IEDs hadn't disappeared from his HUD, and the enemy hadn't disappeared either. They had stopped near the mines however, as if they were trying to understand how their buddy from earlier died.

"Why haven't the bombs exploded yet?"

Gary squeezed hard on the detonator hoping to whatever deity was out there that Sunshine did not see.

A millisecond later the explosives went off. A flash of light erupted out of Gary's peripheral vision.

He felt his combat harness and mesh suit get ruffled around slightly by the shockwave and around him he could hear the crashing pebbles and dirt landing around them as they ran.

"Never mindâ€¦"

Gary promised himself, if he survived this operation, he would pray his Gary out to whatever deity that ruled the heavens.

Taking a full, quick glance toward the somewhat distant cliff side, he noticed a large smoke column and a fire crackling to life through the tree branches. Debris continued to rain down around him and Sunshine.

With every close encounter Gary had, it seemed the universe had a new danger to throw at him today. Another unnatural ghostly hiss rippled through the air, completely blocking out the sound of footsteps and the distant burning fire.

Turning straight back around, Gary redoubled his efforts out of self-preservation. Sunshine in stark contrast reacted out of pure curiosity and calculation. He flipped his body to face the coming enemy, a group of hunters who chased heels without tire. He attempted to gauge their visible distance and failed to notice the catastrophic error of a fallen log along the path. Gary made a running leap and cleared the trunk without a quirk. Sunshine however was now a jumbled mess. A disaster seconds before it hit.

He flew butt-first over the log and did an unintentional summersault. His pads hit the dirt with an ominous thud. His spine leaned toward the ground and his legs rested on a warm-pair of shoulders.

Laying in an awkward pose with a woman in an Army Trooper BDU drab, her black under-suit was visible in places revealing a feminine texture beneath the mesh-clothed camo and harness ballistics protection. The cloth was painted to the image of a drab grassy green mixed with elements of wilted tan. The items much like the other Army unit counterparts, was able to blend well in the dim light and humid atmosphere caused by storm clouds overhead. Her head unit, a skull incasing helmet was nowhere to be found. Her eyes were tinted a slight blue because of the apparent adaptive eye contacts common to almost all humans. Underneath the eye wear, her hazel eyes showed a murky mix of emotions ranging between annoyance, confusion and limited shock at the sudden fact that there was a full grown man on top of her in a somewhat suggestively intimate position.

Her body armor and mesh camo was torn and worn quite well. There were specks of dirt and mud caking her uniform and exposed skin was shown along a torn region along the neck line. Dried blood coated her under-suit. Short blond hair was tied back in a tight bun also caked with brown mud.

Gary couldn't help chuckling nervously. He was joined in by two other

low-audible laughs.

Her teammates grouped around her, their body language giving a similar story. Their appearances gave off the same impression he came across wherever he served. The all-too-common exhausted soldier well acquainted with death, their exhaustion urging them to drop dead on the ground at any second. Gary had trouble telling them from greenhorns or initiated soldiers. The woman's young face didn't go well with her glazed eyes.

Her companions were both men, if they hadn't been soldiers in a warzone, they probably would have been a group of friends staying out late and having a good time. Gary could only wish for such a scene, the Great War had made impossible for such good moments his elders would talk about when reminiscing about their prime years. None of them looked a day over 28. As Sunshine scrambled to get off the now-seething woman, Gary's HUD lit up with the group being labeled as friendly.

Their names showed up at the bottom of his visor; Private First Class Nathan Oakland, Specialist Melissa Dalton, and Private First Class Ivan Ramirez.

Ramirez was likely a designated squad support, the MA5B with 5.56mm rounds in his hands was armed with a 60-round mini drum, a suctioned bipod stand, and advanced Infrared target scope. He carried a duffel bag on his back likely filled with C-12 shaping charges, extra magazines, and a ton of extra goodies. His bodysuit covered him head to toe; his helmet still remained polarized making his identity frosty.

The brooding Melissa Dalton was armed with a shaky Battle Rifle, a holographic zoom scope shaped like a rectangular prism sat on its magnetic and tracked rail. Based on the way she held herself, she probably was a rifleman. Her weapon maximizing on mid to long range combat allowed her to pick off targets over 1000 meters and still remain somewhat accurate.

Private Oakland acted as a squad leader; he carried a MA5D with iron sights turned up and a smart airburst grenade launcher replacing the standard flashlight grip. His face was clear similar to his female counterpart and had wavy dark brown hair; his Native American color tone gave him a more ghostly illusion in the weak fog.

"What are you doing here, soldier?" Sunshine asked as he swiped his clothes as if to remove dirt or dust from his suit. His question directed at the woman and the highest ranking of the three young soldiers, was instead received instead by Oakland, further enforcing Gary's theory on him being team leader. If that was true, the group was probably a mix of former fireteams, the battle on the ground was evidently bloody after all.

"Ummâ€¦ I'm currently in charge. PFC Nathan Oakland, acting commanding officer of Army Squad detachment Nebraska ad Malta of the 32nd Light Armor Division, Alpha Company. We're retreated from our former objective, position got overturned. We're heading for FOB Hellhound since our squad rendezvous was lost too." Nathan stated in a quick burst of English words.

"Slow down, son. Explain slowly." Sunshine replied getting into his

more serious demeanor.

"Alright, we were acting as Operation Security for a scout convoy about 5 clicks from here; light equipment and fast, mobile vehicles. We were severely unprepared when these Covenant ambush us. Three Wraith Plasma Mortar Platforms, over 2 dozen Brutes and Grunts. I could have sworn that they destroyed us with magic. Warthogs were fried to a crisp; Pumas were turned into balls of great fire. We stood no chance. We lost four guys in the first five minutes. Soon after we were running for hell, we lost the entire convoy and the survivors were scattered. No one but us got to the regrouping area. We lack reinforcements, so we retreated back to this spot and farther if we get the chance.

"Alright, private, we'll get you and your guys back to base. We also happen to be heading back to Hellhound. Welcome to the Special Operations, you're all now honorary Army Rangers. Stay together and you come back alive in one piece, maybe." Sunshine stated looking at each person with a cheerful grin. Gary ignored the feeling in the back of his mind to smack the guy across the head. He really was dull in the brains department sometimes.

"Alright; inventories? What do we have?" Sunshine asked as if he was a community planner or something.

"We got a pack of Grade-4 Tactical Explosives; C-12 and the rest of the bunch. We also got a Deployable Bubble Shield, tactical Smoke Beacons, scavenged medical supplies and oh, a Sticky Detonator!" Oakland exclaimed.

Sunshine looked down on his tactical-display on his left arm and measured their radar distance to a maximum of 2000 meters, anything moving in the area showed up on the map with full clarity to him. Gary looked over his shoulder, the Brute pack was still running at a constant speed; they were closing in quickly.

"We're going to improvise with explosives. Ramirez, take your explosive satchel and scatter its contents. Specialist Dalton, take whatever strong-scented medical supplies you have from your dead. Take it and spread it around, if you got any extra blood transfusions, I would use that if I were you. Oakland, you got the detonator. When I give you the signal, I want you to light this joint." Sunshine said as he motioned his hand in a mock gesture for a countdown to zero.

Sunshine rallied the group as Melissa and Ivan armed the trap. Forming a column formation, the group ran for the hills with little to no thought, just following Sunshine on his lovely day of explosion and loud sounds.

Rushing further into the thicket where the coincidental path began to disappear and narrow, Gary accounted for the distance the enemies continued to get closer. Gary still felt a sense of awe every time he saw the moving markers of the large and menacing Brutes, their motions were beyond comprehension as they ran twice if not three times faster than the average human. They would be on top of them soon; the only thing Gary and the group could do was to keep on running.

The hissing that had started the entire hit-and-run fiasco suddenly

had subsided. The movement of enemy forces also slowed to a halt.

"We're green." Gary said.

"On my mark: three, two, one— now!" Sunshine called as he counted down to Oakland.

Nathan pushed his palm down on the detonator; a light hollow click was heard followed by a deafening explosion. The enemies disappeared just as the previous explosion on the cliff had done its job.

Around him another rain of debris came crashing down upon the group, black dirt like falling rain drops splattered around them. Gary, however ignored the natural world around him, instead he looked at the motion tracker. Four more light blue unknown targets were closing in.

They moved in a more cautious movement almost as if they were humans with military training. Yet as soon as he shrunk his motion detector so that the sensors could give more precise scan, the light blue circles turned into red enemy markers.

"Sunshine, we got tangos!" Gary yelled as the dots increased speeds, likely the enemy had heard them.

Switching to a more serious attitude, a glimpse of Sunshine's flexible personality, he started to spit around orders.

"Form up on my position, Heart where are the targets coming from?"

"North; they're 40 meters and closing."

"Alright, line up and prepare to fire. Ivan, open up as soon as you see Cyclops."

Ivan held his MA5B with stressful focus, his body tight and ready for deadly recoil.

The group became quiet as the enemy footsteps echoed in their direction to the north, to Gary's left as Gary lined his weapon.

An ominous red light blinked into existence among the green forestry.

"Open up!" Sunshine called as Ivan allowed his weapon run through ammunition.

Alone Gary heard the puffing MA5 as its caseless rapid firing coil-gun ammunition tore up the heavens.

The assault rifle-turned support weapon eliminated the hostile with a noticeable thump and splattered jelly. The enemy's corpse hit the ground; however, the dead creature's team mates were much more efficient.

They spread out and took cover from around trees as Gary and the rest of the Army troopers jumped into combat. Gary rushed into the brush and dropped down into a prone position. He took aim with his carbine.

Its shape resembled a MA5 without the bullet counter, favoring a small counter running along the top facing upwards toward the sky behind the rear iron sight. Gary had a holographic prism sight similar to the Battle Rifle, a forward angled grip sat securely up front and the magazine cartridge instead favoring the middle of the weapon instead of the back like the most service rifles of the UNSC.

He flipped the safety to semi-auto and he aimed down the sight. His group of ragtag soldiers was out of his line of sights allowing him free reign to fire his weapon. Instead he took his time and attempted to engage one Brute armed with a Spiker, a weapon that fired hot and sometimes molten iron spines that would shatter on impact.

The bullets exited the barrel with a dim thong every time a round exited. He put two, then three, followed by another five selected rounds into the tree and Brute body. Two rounds supposedly impacted based on his HUD computer. He fired again in selective semi-auto fire. The rounds smashed into the Brute's arm. The beast let out a loud cry as his arm went limp and the beast exited cover.

Bad mistake, Ivan opened up from somewhere to the side and tore the alien to dust. Another Brute had spotted Gary as hot iron spikes impacted the ground near him, narrowly missing his leg by three meters. Rolling out of harm's way, Gary lined up another shot to fire at the Brute that tried to kill him only to find another brute aiming at him with a scorching violet red single-handed plasma rifle. The plasma bolts bounced around him as he took cover, this time behind a torched tree.

Gary felt a stinging along his arm, not a heavy sting but a strong irritation that made him want to scratch devilishly. Checking his arm, he found a plasma bolt had skimmed his mesh outfit, the smart material had clogged together to capture the excess energy and heat before it impacted his skin, something that would have killed him if he had been wearing anything else. He felt extremely hot around the area as well making his arm go slightly numb for a second.

Looking back at the motion tracker, Gary saw more enemy reinforcements arrive. Gary was surprised that he hadn't encountered any Chupacabras yet.

Looking back out of cover, he saw a Brute firing at Melissa as she took cover behind some large boulders across from the other side of the road. Her battle rifle lay unattended as she had swapped to her pistol.

Taking pot shots at the Brute, Gary grabbed the creatures' attention from Dalton and brought more raining plasma upon his position. Two Brutes were now upon him. He shot a Brute quickly in the head and hid back behind the thick tree as the other Brute closed in. Gary primed a grenade when suddenly, a loud crack echoed through the woods that were distinctively different from the other weapon sounds. He peaked out of cover to find a large hole in the now dead Brute, looking toward Melissa. She was attempting to reload her magnum quickly as she gave him a nod and backed out of her shelter to find new cover. Gary nodded back and took note of his situation. Gary powered off the grenade and returned it back to his combat harness.

He watched his motion tracker and saw how the group had spread out,

no casualties, no injuries, but some close calls here and there; nothing worth noting. Eight Brutes was now the collective number, even with the kill count of the Army group at five.

Suddenly, a body landed to his left.

Sunshine looked like he just came back from the dead; his body was caked with mud and dirt. His suit gave off a heavy odor of cinder from a flash of fire.

"God, what happened to you?" Gary asked.

"Threw an incineration grenade while behind coverâ€¦ Brute attempted to charge me after intercepting the bomb in a blind rage. Blew my cover away and burnt my suit. I'll be fine; we just need to regroup, the Bravo Kilos are starting to encircle our position."

"Alright we'll move southward."

"Agreedâ€¦"

Sunshine got up quickly and let his light machine gun pepper enemy positions with its distinct buzz saw sounding rounds as the coils within projected the bullets forward.

Gary started to crawl backwards and swapped his carbine to use his pistol as he made a cautious retreat.

Above the sky was lighting up with new activity.

Over the team radio, he heard Sunshine ask him clearly without having to speak over the combat. The sky lit up with flashes of red and white as a harsh boom echoed in the clouds overhead.

"Is that fucking thunder?"

"Definitely not thunder!" Gary replied as true thunder crackled across the landscape.

Another rain of peppering crackles, a flash of yellow and blue and the dull red hue of a burning inferno lit the sky. Breaking the cloud cover, a large metal contraption burned seemingly slowly to the ground. Around him time seemed to slow down as the machine burned its way toward the ground. A hexagonal prism shape, a split jaw-like indentation and immobile bridge gave away its identity as a UNSC naval frigate.

Gary climbed up as he continued to watch the sky. The fighting had stopped; he looked around to see the Brutes also stare in shock at the sight of the warship breaking into the atmosphere.

The ship was a blazing inferno of twisted metal and smoking parts. Her engines continued to fire at full blast and her emergency thrusters were at full burn attempting to control its doomed descent.

On its side, just barely noticeable on the edge of the broken armor was the name, UNSCS Brave and Bold.

"Holy shit!" Ivan yelled across the channel.

The Bold was a P. K. Stride/Strident-class Escort Frigate with a length of 575 meters, named after Colonel Phillip K. Stride, a famous dead officer during the Human-Covenant War; he was the first person to be credited with the destruction of a Covenant Super-carrier. It was eighteen miles away and heading directly for Lake Igor, at its estimated speed, Gary suspected the carnage would have little impact on the ecosystem.

Gary watched as the ship disappeared from view and a loud splash was heard in the distance, the sound of the Bold hitting Lake Igor over the unseen horizon. A low shockwave shook up the trees and the combatants.

The Brutes gave off an equivalent of cheer, a deep throbbing growl similar to a lion's roar. Gary used the second of distraction to aim his pistol and kill several that stood out in the open. He emptied the entire magazine in quick succession dropping three in four seconds.

The other Brutes quickly reacted and began to fire at him and Sunshine who had been standing nearby.

They jumped and rolled into a group of bushes as Melissa provided precise suppressive fire. An airburst grenade lit up a Brute square in the chest as Nathan scrambled to load another round into the launcher while standing next to Specialist Dalton.

Over the buzz saw gunfire, Gary could hear Ivan's blood-curling cries as he fired his weapon in anger from the hip forcing the menace to drop behind cover of trees.

The fluorescent trees appeared less bright as the combat continued. Gary took a breather to get air running back through his systems. He was starting to feel hazy from the changes in blood flow and emotions.

Suddenly, a new sound rumbled through his ear drum. The constant vroom of a fast moving vehicle and the buzzing of an air machine were getting stronger and stronger. Two honks lit up the combat zone as an armored jeep rolled down the makeshift path running a Brute through the chest and sending him flying a good distance followed by a machine gun tearing the body into another bloody mess. A set of three Warthog armed with machine guns and fresh Army soldiers had arrived with a Pelican Gunship flying overhead.

The remaining Brutes, recognizing their impending doom, stuck their metaphoric tails between their legs and ran for the hills.

Over the team communicator, a new voice interrupted the cooling down combat zone. "Anyone need a lift?"

The mellow voice of one Sergeant Forest "Raven" Smith, a fellow Army Ranger and the current commander of the hovering pelican who happened to open the vehicles rear hatch and drop a rope ladder down to Gary and Sunshine.

The survivors of Army Detachment Malta and Nebraska gave the pair curt nods before jumping onboard the jeep convoy. The group was headed in the direction of FOB Hellhound to the West, the convoy made

a quick U-turn and headed back the way they came with the greenhorns onboard.

Climbing up the ladder, Gary and Sunshine had some small talk with the other arrivals, the members of their full Fireteam Valor.

Climbing on in, the discussion entered a new calm. There were now four men in the aircraft's cargo hold. Raven, Sunshine, Gary, and the lowest ranking soldier and designated life saver, Specialist Duncan "Fork" York.

They were all dressed in similar garments of the unorthodox style of the Army Rangers. They wore camo mesh covers instead of armor plating and wore in a mix of coal black and steel gray in contrast to the Army standard of dry brown and wilted greens. Their faces were obscured not by metal masks or full skull protection but crystalline reinforced eyewear, smart material over the mouth, and chain-mail like links.

Raven was armed with a MA9B while Fork carried a M7-PDW. Their body language was flexible much like Gary's and Sunshine's as they held themselves in loose and unorthodox mannerism. It made the group less impressionable.

"Soâ€¦ how was sniping?" Fork asked to strike a conversation.

"Okâ€¦ not too hard, how was scoutingâ€¦?" Gary asked out of manners.

"Not so great, the Brutes are putting on the pressure. We lost two forward logistic outposts in the last twenty four hours, you know? Those stupid Bravo Kilos, we may have the technological and logistic advantage yet they keep defying logic and beating us back with numbers. You won't believe how many Grunts were out thereâ€¦" Fork said rambling on in a psychotic like trance.

"You ok?"

"Yeah, just so many goddam gruntsâ€¦"

"When we get back to the ship, I'm signing you up for a rundown with the psychologist." Sunshine said without emotion.

A pregnant silence followed.

"Just jokingâ€¦"

"Whatever," Gary said. "What are you guys doing out here?"

"Trying to find you, the Colonel gave us new orders. We're going after some Hell-jumpers near the River Corrientes." Fork stated.

"Why do we suddenly have to reel those worms back from their hooks?" Gary asked.

"No idea, the Colonel only said it was important."

"Fishing references, really?" Raven said as he turned to face

Gary.

"Don't judge, just joking just like CO said." Gary said raising his hands in defense.

"Alright then, contact him." Sunshine said.

Raven tapped a button near the door of pilots' cabin as the rest of the group strapped themselves into the seats. Gary allowed the metal restraining belt to come over his head and lock his body in place. He observed the rest of the group do the same. Raven walked over and also restrained himself as the hologram-projector began searching for a signal. The cyan-colored projector continued to state: "Searching" as it scanned until finally it fizzled out. In its place was the image of a full grown man.

The image of Colonel Neville Howard's life-size hologram revealed the bags below his eyes along with the apparent scars highlighted by the projector; he wore a Army-issue overcoat from the standard Ranger BDU suit: a sort of mesh shirt made of reactive carbon fibers and a under-suit meant to contain heat and harden when impacted by objects at fast velocities or objects of considerable mass. His greasy, mud-splattered brown hair was even visible in the hologram only it fumbled at a dim blue; and his own MA9B sat lifeless on his combat harness.

The man looked directly at Sunshine as he spoke, "Master Sergeant Silva, here is the details on your task; nearly 2 hours ago, I sent an ODSF fireteam to scout out a Forerunner site only recently discovered by our tech analysts by listening to communications between Bravo Kilo high ups. The last time they reported in was 20 minutes ago, they reported they had been ambushed and were locked down; they had discovered an artifact within the site; I wish for you and your group to act as support for the group when you arrive, from there I'll send an extraction force. Treat this like an ordinary extraction op."

"Land near enemies without alerting attention. Recon and find VIPs; eliminate hostiles. Contact base, pop flares and dig in for extract."

"I would have sent another group sooner, however, communication buoys are down with the amount of damage the Covenant caused at the main warzone, you're the only Special Mission Unit that is within direct transmitting range. Anyway, retrieve them and bring them back home safely, we need that artifact. That is all; just please, try to be cautious, sending your group in is stressful enough and I don't want to waste men over something that the eggheads could probably find somewhere else, we don't need any more body-bags€|."

As soon as the man finished his statement, Sunshine stated, "We'll get it done, sir, don't worry about us."

"Sir, just out of curiosity. We lost our atmospheric advantage, we've got enemy aircraft swarming the skies and the attack frigates were shot down as you likely already know. How's the orbital conflict?" Raven butted in.

"Son, our position is very fragile. Enemy battle group has retreated to the outer edge of the planet's gravitation field and has been

skimming the maxes of our scanners. We're not sure when they will return and attack, we are waiting right now. I can't provide any frigates right now though, the ones provided have either been shot down already or are being pushed out of attack range due to enemy ground-based capital guns holding them at bay. You likely saw the Brave and Bold go down earlier, capital guns used precise attack trajectories from a great distance. Tier One groups have been deployed to eliminate the silos, but it's going to be a while before we can take back the skies. Capital ships, before you ask, are a misallocation of valuable resources in orbit. Again, Howard out."

The hologram dissipated.

"Well way to be straight forward, sir!" called Raven to the now terminated communicator.

"Alright men, you know the drill," Sunshine said making a quick turn about to face all the men in the cargo hold. "We get in, we save the flying coffin boys, and we all come home. Sound good?"

"Yes, sir!" the group chanted.

Suddenly the voice of the pilot came on, "Alright Valor, atmosphere combat is still heavy and insertion is going to be bumpy. Hope you all brought your chutes, if everything goes as planned we'll be in position in ten minutes.

"Copy Winchester-1, get us there now, those ODS only have so long, if they aren't already dead..." Raven stated.

"They're ODSs, don't count them out just yet." The pilot stated.

"Flight check complete, all engines are prepped, diagnostics are green..., we're ready for takeoff." The copilot also stated as Gary felt a rumble in the seats and the vehicle shot away based on the amount of G-force that was being applied on his body.

The open hatch closed quickly and the forest below disappeared behind the metal plating.

The hum of electronics played as an emergency red light lit the small compartment and the rumbling of distance rain pounded the machine.

The peace was sleepless, even in the dim lighting, the fire-team refused to sleep, too much had already happened keeping the group alert.

The silence was however interrupted by the sudden sound of slow elevator music, a kind of smooth and head-tearing smooth jazz supported by shacks and bells. Internally, Gary was going ballistic, what idiot played elevator music while in combat?

"This is Stimulus Progression by MUZAK, beautiful, isn't it?" Winchester stated on the mic.

"Charmingâ€|" Gary stated quietly and sarcastically.

Suddenly, the red lights began to flash and the group started to look around aimlessly. The music was drowned out by the outward sounds that Gary so happily accepted without thinking much on the subject.

The g-forces had at one point stabilized, now everything was jumbling, tools were flying off racks, a box of medical equipment nearly smashed Raven in the head.

The sound of stereotypical lasers echoed outside the hull, a beeping sound joined the red light as the placed flashed great danger.

"We got two enemy boogies, I'm trying to shake themâ€|. God dammit!"

Gary's stomach did a somersault as the VTOL craft did a spin and shot toward the ground, crates and other items rose to meet the closed metal hatch. Gary felt like the air was trapped in the back of his throat and he was about to cough up a small intestine or something, a feeling as if a moving snake was bouncing within his abdomen.

"Get up! Get up, you stupid piece of crap!" The pilot again yelled.

"Enemies still on us, two Banshees!" The copilot stated as the plane raced across the sky as far as Gary could guess.

Suddenly, an explosion rocked the compartment. The hatch flew off its metal hinges as air entered the room and two enemy Banshees, small in size yet technologically advanced and just as menacing, held their position behind the Pelican Gunship.

They're twin hydrogen-based propulsion pods allowed them to maneuver, alas, below considered acceptable combat speeds around in the air like a speedy glider.

"Releasing emergency lock, jump Rangers! Jump!" Winchester said.

The group of four rushed out the back, their parachute packs securely attached to their suits and ready for deployment since the first second they put on their armor for work.

They rushed one by one out the back. Gary jumped last and as soon as he was out, he made out the shocking picture of the Pelican exploding in a bright fireball and headed toward the ground like a flaming space rock.

One Banshee followed the wreckage down continuously firing. The other decided however, to chase the survivors. The Banshee flew downward toward Gary, descending at a decent speed and freaking Gary out of his wits.

Without thinking, Gary turned his entire body to face the aircraft and circled to get a spin on a wing. He made a diving formation as the ground opened up below him. Gary watched as the other three deployed their chutes and passed him going skyward.

Gary on the other hand went with flying squirrel-style, activating his wing suit. The ground raced toward him as he chose to attack the jet attempting to pull off a turn to shoot the retreating figure of

paratroopers now falling slowly behind it. Gary deployed a Semtex grenade, sticky and surrounded by a coat of ballistic-proof gelatin to protect the item from weapons damage. It stuck to one wing securely and started to beep. Gary let his chute fly and his body was like a yo-yo, yanked back up and the wind was knocked out of like a sucker punch. He took the blow and watched the Banshee attack craft explode as plasma and purple flames danced across the destroyed contraption.

"Heart, you're dropping to quick! Pull out now!" Fork called from above through the communications suite.

Gary also noticed his falling form as he attempted to control his descent.

"Pull up, you sick son of a bitch!"

He ran into several pine trees and then disappeared into the thicket.

He crashed into a large branch and he hit the ground.

Above Gary could make out the fleeting aerial forms of his fire-team in the distance.

He attempted to get up yet blackness was already absorbing him. Gary lifted one hand and pressed a button on his arm computer and the battered and scratched metallic parachute disappeared back into its compartment.

Gary drifted into unconsciousness and everything was swallowed by black unconscious sleep.

...

"_Nations, like stars, are entitled to eclipse. All is well, provided the light returns and the eclipse does not become endless night. Dawn and resurrection are synonymous. The reappearance of the light is the same as the survival of the soul." _" Victor Hugo (1802-1885), Former French Poet, Novelist, and Dramatist in the Romantic Movement

â€|

2. Deterrent

Hey guys, this is the second chapter, I know it's shorter than it should be. I have decided to extend the battle another chapter since I got a tip suggesting splitting the chapter to give me room to work with. I am currently producing chapter 3, it will focus from Heart's point of view and should be here sometime near the end of Spring Break. Happy Spring Break by the way. Thanks for staying tuned and being patient with me. It's been a year since this story was uploaded. Thanks guys, have a good vacation.

...

"_It's been a year since the Great War ended, somewhat strange to begin a novel yet here we are. The Universe is a dangerous place.

Humanity knows this well as shown by the three decades of combat our people fought. Now we are rebuilding our fleets and colonies. Why fleets, though? Isn't the enemy defeated, we won the war. It's not the fear of another insurrection or the Covenant coming back it's what we don't know that we fear the most. Our answer is the UNSC; a deterrent for unbound threats of tomorrow. Now that is a true recruiting ad."_ â€" Professor Andy L. Alderman, PHD. Political Sciences at Columbia University; excerpt from his book: "Remember the Heavens: Deterrence for the Stars," URNA National Nonfiction Best Sellers List - 2554

â€|

["Deterrent"]

[CPT Jo "Joe" Weisheng, UNSC Navy]

[September 2555]

[Former Colony of Aragon]

â€|

{A prominent News Anchor from the Beyond Sol Broadcast Corporation (BSBC), a popular news network among the Inner and some Outer Colonies, is swiveling her chair to face a camera and speak with a co-worker for the audience. The News Anchor is a woman in her early 40s; she had tanned skin, black hair, green eyes, and a rounded nose that suggested she may be of mixed birth, likely Latino, Saudi, and Caucasian. She was wearing a gray winter coat with authentic fur from a furry animal.}

NEWS ANCHOR (NA):"Right now in government, we're seeing the beginning of an over-do ethics talk on the development of human capacity toward destruction. The government is currently debating the future establishment of the United Nations Space Command, the former emergency governing body and military wing of the government. Joining us, light years away from a Navy warship; Hailey Newbern, our traveling reporter on her first tour with the UNSC Navy onboard the SENTINEL cruiser, Mogadishu over the former colony of Aragon."_

{Another woman appears on the show, she is a blonde young adult looking about her late 20s. She had more selective features. Blond hair, hazel eyes, and a distinct lip fixture gave her the appearance of African-Caucasian decent. She was dressed in marine-styled clothing, a light undershirt, sports bra, loose trunks, and dark green over shirt that she wore around her waist like a girdle or a belt.}

NA:"Good Afternoon, Hailey."_

Hailey Newbern (H):"And good morning to you, Rachelle."_

NA:"Hailey, I would like to begin by asking you about life aboard a UNSC warship; just so the viewers can get an idea of how the violence looks like from the front."_

HN:"War isn't cheap Hailey. The Human-Covenant War ended two years ago, yet we still continue to see sons and daughters coming home in

bodybags. Below my feet on the former colony of Aragon, soldiers are locked in an epic stalemate with a Covenant faction. The death toll so far has mounted between 200 and 500 casualties for 1000 alien dead. Even if the Covenant War is over, I'm sure many of the people who survived the Insurrections will recognize the similarities between it and the Glasslands Campaign, this aftermath is going to cripple the UCE from the inside because we lack the populace and the weaponry to maintain a grasp on former colony worlds lost to the Covenant war machine."_

Fredrick (F): "Ma'am, the casualties are necessary to achieve Humanity's goal of returning to its formal glory and beyond, if we can't take the enemy when they're weakened they will recover andâ€"_"_

HN: "That was Fred, the Mogadishu's AI, kind of a pathetic personality choice for a computer."_

F: "I heard that, young missy!"_

HN: _"...he tends to butt his way into conversations like that, a lot. Snarky computer; anyway the battle is getting worse, currently the enemy Navy taskforce has been chased off and out of the planetary orbit, they'll be back however and I'm not sure we have another chance to stop them. We've lost 6 frigates, a cruiser, and a destroyer to the Covenant forces. That was another 2000 maybe 3000 souls lost in minutes. The body count is rising and it won't stop unless we stop ourselves. The UNSC maybe powerful, they're not invincible. It's time to get off the warpath and get to rebuilding on the things that survived. I'm no alien lover, but this has gotten too far."_

NA: "Sounds like a bloodbath occurring there; you're sure about the dangers of fighting these bands of insurgents?"_

HN: _"Without a single doubt, the UCE will begin to tread water over the deep end if we don't stop fighting, the UNSC will be the weight that will pull us down. We stop being so violent and focused on vengeance, we may live to see our glory return if that's what we really want. We should protect and build upon what we currently have. This war has gone on long enough, it's time for change."_

NA: "Thank you Hail, we'll pass you the reins now."_

{The News Anchor's image disappeared from sight as the image of the reporter came into full focus bringing a backdrop of the ship's busy bridge and the admiral sitting across from the reporter. He was dressed in the standard officer uniform with green clothe and light armor plates along the shoulders, he was Caucasian with dyed lime green hair with brown eyes. He sat with a slight tightness. He looked extremely annoyed or somewhat nervous.}

HN: "Thank you, Rachelle. Today we have with me Rear Admiral Larry Keels-Jones, the brains of the warship Mogadishu. Thank you for allowing me to film from you're bridge."_

Larry Keels-Jones (LKJ): "It's not trouble at all ma'am, thank you for joining us."_

HN: "Alright Admiral, tell me; what is your belief on the United

Nations Space Command?"_

LKJ:"Well, before we get to that, there is a common misconception with the acronym, UNSC, it is publically labeled in the government and the people as United Nations Space Command, a moniker that we only started using around 2496 with the common misconception about our singular focus of space. The real name, recognized by the documents and filed away when we do budget spending in our department, we go by United Nations Security Council. It was an organization founded in the 20th__century following the Earth-fought war of World War Two, where we saw the American-led United Nations erupt from the historical year of 1945. The UN Security Council began its work as a unifying military organization at an attempt to keep the peace between nations headed by the military powers of the time. China, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and the United States of America. Following relative peace into the 21st__century, we saw a rise in permanent members as the Council usually rotated members from other nations into power once every so many years. Prominent members that would later join by 2050, included Japan, Germany, India, Brazil, and several others increasing the permanent council from 5 to 15. By 2100, most nations had become states of multiple nations coming together following the European Union. From here and the events of the Interplanetary War, the UNSC became the figure head of our military strength. I believe that the power we built up during the Great War needs to be restored, and I hope Madam President agrees, there is a great need for us to rebuild our forces; we need to put on a good show for our new allies and enemies out in the galaxy, after all."_

HN:"Thank you for the history lesson, Jones. Can you inform us about this military warship as well?"_

LKJ:"Alright ma'am, most of the info I know is classified and you certainly will never leave this room if I told you everything. There is little I can tell you, so don't even begin to ask more into that subject, though I'll give you a rundown. The UNSCS Mogadishu is a Marathon Flight 2B-class Command/Heavy Attack Cruiser analogue using a standard HOPLITE-class defense system, the predecessor of the modern SENTINEL, a name that is misguided yet is technically correct. The Mogadishu is set to receive a ship-wide upgrade quite soon. As a Marathon Cruiser, we are one of the last of some of the pre-Covenant War combat systems still in service. Currently, the Navy fields 24 at the moment, another 2 are receiving upgrades, 3 are in dry-dock, and one is in the process of being decommissioned. It's been said that the UNSC will be replacing the Marathons by this year, only 4 weeks ago, the 6th__Autumn-class Cruiser floated out of its orbiting station over Mars. By 2564, all the Marathons will be replaced with a small fleet of 56 Autumn-Flight 1As. My hope is that at least one Marathon ends up as a museum, we need more of those. Museums are great investments to remind ourselves of the past, so we can prepare for our future."_

HN:"So, you agree that we should focus more on building up on private and public investments than military projects?"_

LKJ:"No, we still need a military and quickly if you ask me."_

HN:"Alright, and what do you have to say about the development of military spending. Here's a statistic:_

{A panel showing information quickly goes up and then goes down as soon as she stops speaking.}

HN:"According to media correspondents of the UNSC, the military spends around 48 trillion credits every average solar cycle. Along with the newest face of UNSC combat, we're seeing the eruption of the UNSCS Infinity, the Autumn-series, the Strident-series, and the not-so-recent but quite famous Sun Tzu destroyers, three of which happen to be part of your chain of command. Would you agree that we are establishing an over-militarization campaign, and why or why not?"_

LKJ:"Wellâ€¦ I don't know how command keeps their pocket books in check, all I can say is that the UNSC took quite the beating during the War, it's only natural that we should attempt to rebuild the militaryâ€¦"_

HN:"So, you- you believeâ€¦"_

LKJ:"Can I finish?"_

HN:"â€¦"_

LKJ:"Thank you. As I was saying, the UNSC has almost no power to protect our weakened nation. I can't promise that a new Covenant will rise in the next year, decade, or lifetime. Our reason for increased military buildup is to prepare us for the unknown. There are always threats lurking in the shadows; one day they may be a little fly, next day it's a roaring tsunami. You have to prepare for anything. The UNSC is a shifting, adapting wall of power and justice that holds to protect our way of life from the floodwaters of violence and unknown threats. As one wise man once said: People sleep soundly in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf. We are a deterrence for the unknown, Ms. Newbern, I hope you remember that."_

HN:"Umm, yes-s, sir! Umâ€¦ anyway, moving alongâ€¦"_

{The reporter kept asking Admiral Jones the questions that began to bleed into the background.}

Aboard the Sun Tzu â€"class destroyer, Alexander, Captain Jo Weisheng, or Joe, meditated passively like a sleeping cat. Always with one eye open metaphorically. His peaceful stature was quickly falling apart however. The interview echoing through the halls of the Alexander's bridge was quite frankly giving him a headache.

Without opening an eye, he ordered his ships artificial intelligence, Madison, to fix the problem.

"Maddie, could you fix the problem?"

"Of course, sir. However I do not think that shutting off Lieutenant Krasovic's monitor will do anything about your headache. Might I suggest visiting Clinical on Deck 3, sir?" Madison said in his somewhat British, pre-American slighted accent.

"Not at the moment, I need everyone combat ready since the last attack caught us off guard and nearly lit the bridge on fire. I

already have two-thirds of my bridge crew out of combat, I need the rest to take up for their wounded comrades."

Joe opened his eyes to the sight of Madison's four foot tall hologram glowing a confident green. His form took after James Madison, the fourth president of the historically-significant United States. He looked sort of a cross between a mad scientist and a 18th century English man.

"Aye sir, may I also suggest getting back to the mission directive table, Commander Summers is approaching the elevator on deck three since her visit to the infirmary. And Krasovic has blocked my access to the weapons column. I am unable to touch the systems based on my protocols. He doesn't seem very happy about it either, might I suggest putting him in his place yourself, sir."

"Thank you for the suggestion, Madison, you're dismissed until we're back in combat. I take it that you won your game of Checkers with Fredrick."

"No sir, his pawn-wall strategy for once is actually working, don't know how he gets it done. He must be running a buzz in my systems again, I'll get a reconfigure on my core personality in a bit. Later, Captain."

Walking from his chair near the back of the chamber, Joe walked up to Lieutenant Agafya Krasovic's station at the weapon stations, a line of computer stations along desks.

"Sir." Krasovic said as he saluted the Captain.

"Lt." Joe stated giving Krasovic a critical eye as he also saluted in response. "Could you do me a favor son, and mute that piece of crap you call journalism!"

"Sir! Sorry sir! I was just trying to get an idea of what they reporter was doing. I got curiousâ€¦, I mean doesn't she realize that their ideas are very much the same as the military; we're just two faces of the same coin; if that saying is even usable at this point."

"That's understandable, Krasovic, but please turn it down it's making my migraine un-bearable." Joe stated and began to head back to the tactical display in the center of the bridge. "Oh and by the way, would you please unlock your control station, we don't want to have Madison reporting you for insubordinate behavior."

"Sir!" Krasovic stated and sat back down to do his job.

At the tactical display table Joe had the sight of his command crew working or messing away at different stations in the chamber. On one end of the room was the large sectioned window that looked out toward space. The window was protected by two layers of energy shields, a wall of hard plasma, and 12 inches of reinforced glass. A wall of defense Titanium Alloy A3 plating was also available in the case that the ship came under attack. Out the window, a small number of warships were orbiting a lush green and blue planet known as Aragon, it was a temperate Earth-like world with an 80% Earth gravity. Lucky for humans, genetics allowed humans to adapt almost effortlessly to the changing gravities of other worlds between 30% and 120% earth

gravity. A former haven for human life, it was now an abandoned rock inhabited by enemies of man. The battlegroup had been in the region fighting on and off world with Covenant Loyalist forces for nearly two weeks now and finally, the enemy had been driven off the world. There was still a small enemy holdout fleet at the edge of the system skimming the edges of the ships' scanners.

Mogadishu and three of her escort frigates were among the warships out the window. It was a beautiful sight, the might machines just floating peacefully to the background of twinkling stars.

Suddenly, the sound of the interview was back up. Krasovic was up to his tricks again.

{The conversation continued to be one-sided. The admiral attempting to repeat his message and reassure the audience that the UNSC was doing the right thing and the reporter giving him specifically negative questions trying to entice a reaction.}

HN:"Alright then; another question? Here is a statement from anti-war activist, __Mildred Fosdick of former colony Emerald Cove_**_. "_**

{A panel appeared with the quote of a woman appeared. The woman's recording is seen but is hard to make out due to screen proportion.}

"_We should be on the defensive, if we continue to push back out into the Glasslands, sooner or later, we will have another Human-Covenant War on our hands."_

{The panel returns to the interview.}

HN:"What do you have to say to people who worry about awakening old enemies?"_

NA:"Well, umm, the work of the UNSC is to protect and serve the human populous. We lost over 200 colony worlds and we abandoned a tally of around 800 planets during the Human-Covenant War. We understand the risks of human expansion, yet we did it for over four and a half centuries, suddenly do we have to slow down and back off because there is a threat to our security as a species. We are reclaiming worlds to help start anew. There will always be wars, it is better that we meet threats head on instead of waiting for them to find us._

HN:"Strong words, Admiral, I take it that you are a heavy supporter of reclamation movement, do you have any idea how much our new 'neighbors' want thoseâ€". "_

{Suddenly, the screen goes black and a sort of crackle of white noise illuminated from the monitor. Again the image of the previous News Anchor appeared.}

NA:"Well, it seems they are having some technical difficulties. We'll try to reconnect at a different time."_

NA:"Moving on, in other news, the UNSCS Infinity, the largest warship since the UNSC Supercarrier during the Great War at 5.56 kilometers, is to begin its first operations in the Glasslands next

month. The military hopes that the ship's influence will be able to secure the region in the next decade. Lawmakers have attempted to strike it down in the months before its official christening ceremony, now experts are asking as it deploys, "Will it be enough?"_

NA:"Refugees escaping the violence of the Sangheili Civil Wars have increased by ten percent last week as the violence increases across Sanghelios and the other Sangheili worlds. Madam President, Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood of the UNSC, and Arbiter Thel 'Vadam have been negotiating ways to peacefully transfer the aliens back to their worlds."_

NA:"And finally, the hunger strikes in Alexandria have threatened to break out into all out conflict as the police failed to apprehend the rioters, Orbital Drop Shock Troopers were deployed in crowd control gear nearly an hour ago."_

NA:"We will be right back after these messages from our sponsors."_

{The woman moved her touch screen display to a certain button and began to shift through data, the camera panned out and went black. It went to commercials.}

"Ummâ€| Captain, did someone disconnect the Mogadishu from the rest of human space?" Krasovic asked.

"Madison, situational report!" Joe called.

"No idea, sir. The Mogadishu is still there, I'm not detecting any anomaliesâ€| wait, sir, the Brutes; they'veâ€!" Madison said as he appeared on the tactical screen with a magnified model of the Mogadishu, it was quickly lit in red lights.

"What is going on Madison? Get me a direct line to the Mogadishu'sâ€!" Joe yelled when out the window, the Mogadishu was suddenly illuminated in a bright, white flash of light. A few seconds after the light peaked a shockwave was felt through the entire battlegroup. The Alexander's bridge rocked violently and its passive orbiting position over the planet was suddenly twisted by 20 degrees; the light died down and in the place of the Mogadishu's proud cylindrical form, debris and torn metal floated gradually through space. No longer was there a body of a warship.

There was no remains, no bodies, escape pods, or attack craft. Only the marks of metallic remains and the dull rush of static that played from the half-established channel between the Alexander and the missing cruiser.

Plasma damage intensified by nuclear pulse propulsion signatures. Nothing was left of the cruiser along with her escorts: 3 Strident escort frigates nowhere to be found.

"Sir, the Doomsday Device, Apache, and Hammerhead have all been destroyed in the Mogadishu's explosion. Covenant forces are starting to bunch up on our scanners. Their moving in quickly: 16 tangeros and we're sitting ducks without command." Madison said from his place on the holographic projection table as he highlighted the two largest enemy warships.

"Madison, get in contact with the other captains! I need a game plan and I need it yesterday." Joe called as he watched the Covenant warships blink into existence on the three-dimensional map.

So far only the largest were labeled as Alpha-1 and Alpha-2: two 3 km long, purple and predatory, Covenant Battlecruisers.

"Captain, the other officers are all calling for you to command. Our warship is at the center of the battlegroup and in the best likely place to take charge. The other captains await your command, sir." Madison stated.

Behind Joe, one Commander Lyndsey Summers entered the bridge with a fast-paced thumping of her combat boots echoing through the chamber. Nodding offhandedly, Joe acknowledged her presence.

She took up position across from him both watching the tactical map as Madison continued to designate different value targets.

"Sir, the Alphas are closing in; they're escorts are measured in lengths between 300 meters and 1 kilometer in length, other capitals labeled Bravos 1-4 are about half the sizes of the Alphas at about 1.5 kilometers." Madison stated.

"Madison, tell the other captains to begin target solutions. I want the space between our groups riddled with MAC rounds and any long range, non-missile based weapon system to break those enemy shields." Joe stated as he started to move his hands across the table, the hologram quickly following his movements. Zooming in on the Alpha Pair, Joe marked his targets to his bridge crew to line up shots without saying a word.

"Madison, armor up. Summers get our communication channels up and running, I want the barrage to be precisely timed. Give the enemy no room for a breath!" Joe stated as he highlighted the two Alphas who noticeably were targeting the Alexander as their weapons showed movement within their battery houses.

The window of the Alexander's bridge was quickly blocked by several inches of thick titanium alloys.

Suddenly 20 Plasma Torpedoes were streaking directly for the Alexander and two closely following Strident-class Escort Frigates, the Nevada and British Columbia.

"Open up now!" Joe called at Krasovic, the only weapons officer currently on station. The dual MAC cannons and their smaller cousins lit up the body of the Alexander and streaked at a fraction of the speed of light toward their targets. They impacted against the enemy warships' shields almost harmlessly as the Brute ships silently speed toward their targets in the orbital region of Aragon. The Alexander suddenly coughed up in its engines, on the orders of Commander Summers sped past the plasma torpedoes and used invisible laser frequencies to jam the enemy magnetic fields and detonate the torpedoes a distance away from the destroyer or her escorts.

Punching at a close marker of about 20 kilometers, the Alexander fired her support railgun turrets at the thick shields of the enemy

cruisers.

"Missiles, lock on targets!" Joe called to the missile stations behind Krasovic's mostly empty row of stations where missile battery teams engaged the Howler, Archer, and Rapier Missile pods that screened speeding canisters full of cheap and powerful mini-missiles smashing their way into the shields of the Brute battlecruisers.

"Sir, Alpha-2's shields are down in Sector Tango-Whiskey Three Charlie. Permission to engage?" Krasovic called from his station.

"Do it, son." Joe called as he zoomed in closely upon the detailed hologram models of the Alexander and the battlecruiser designated Alpha-2. A thin, but defiantly powerful warship; the Alexander's powerful railgun turrets and CIWS system peppered the gapping points in the enemy warship's hull. A bit of overkill, however it got the job done.

The enemy battlecruiser exploded in a brilliant yellow flash. The shockwave rocked the Alexander as it turned to engage the second Alpha-combatant right at the moment engaging the Napoleon, another Sun Tzu destroyer.

"MAC cannons 1 and 2, second barrage!" Joe called. Korsavic followed the order as 6 rounds from the twin vertical barrels of the destroyer ripped apart Alpha-1's shields.

"Summers, order the Nevada and Columbia to finish it. Madison get me an open channel to the rest of the battlegroup." Joe stated.

"Sir." Summers stated and quickly filled the order without question.

"Captain, enemy warships are regrouping. We are preparing a defensive perimeter between the enemy bubble and the planet."

"Good Madison, please begin the channel."

"Yes sirâ€|. Channel is open, all bridges are linked to ours."

"Thank you, Madison," Joe said. "All frigates form up on the destroyers and their escorts. Assault Ships Alpha and Bravo, head for surface to provide aerial support for our troops on the ground. Charlie, Delta, and Echo are to continue to engage the enemy fleet."

A string of "Aye," and "Yes, sir," rang through the microphones in the bridge. A green wave of light engulfed the other human warships registering them as following orders. Several clumps of warships changed into a variety of colors labeling them as Squadron Helios, Squadron Ceres, and Squadron Cupid. Joe's own group now clear of the two battlecruisers, Squadron Mars, had taken damage and was getting an assessment report.

"Sir the Nevada has been destroyed, no survivors. British Columbia has blown out shields, but have begun to recharge and the destroyer escorts Phoenix Reborn and Goddess of Chaos are two minutes out.

Alpha One has some hull breaches but is still targeting us, she'll be on our ass in 30 seconds." Madison stated as the tactics table zoomed in on his warship and its escorts.

"New tangos, designate Bravo 3 through 7 are closing in on us, 300 meter long craft." Petty Officer Osteen called from his combat station, a coms and radar officer.

"Copy, Osteen, mark them."

"Tagged."

"Sir, the other Alpha-lead is on top of us, their still targeting us." Madison stated as a marker switched to the physics differences between the two warships.

"Sir we got an unsecure channel originating from the enemy warship." Osteen called.

"Give me speakers."

"Aye, sir"

The speakers gave a quick thump of static and the gruff voice of a Brute came on to the speaker.

A light burst of gibberish or some form of language played.

"Madison, give me subtitles or something."

With a flick of his avatar, Madison produced a translation on Joe's data pad:

Demons, renegades of the Great Journey, your filth has tainted this galaxy for too long. The Great Journey has only been delayed with our Prophets' defeat, but today you shall begin to pay for your sins.

Our warriors out number you ten-to-one on the ground, our warships are vessels of godly justice ripping apart your infernal husks of disease. With our victory on this world's still tainted surface, we shall strike you from the void and with it our victory here will bring upon a new age, a greater age and the return of the mighty Covenant.

You may have slowed our ascent, but the Great Journey cannot be denied any longer. Your kind will burn and with it the Covenant will rise again like the firebird everlasting. You cannot stop us, for I am Tartarus's will, the Chieftain Erebus, and the hand of the Gods. Your destruction is imminent, heed these final moments for they shall be your last.

The message cut off, Joe looked back at Madison and stated, "He's quite the Shakespearian."

"Noted, would you like to send him a return message before our ill-fated destruction?"

"Sure, let's see if we can make him twitch."

"Erebus, or whatever your name is monkey, I've got an offer for you before you decide to burn me and my ships from the night sky. We have about a few thousand troops right now engaged with your beasts, if I call a retreat and blow your fortifications sky-high with my nuclear stock, would you care? I got access to glassing mechanisms as well, just so you know. Your armies would be obliterated in a mere second, how would that look to your subordinates? Think about it before you tread on us, Brute!"

"Message sent, captain." Madison stated with a slight grim smile.

"You got a complaint?"

"No, just want to know what we do next."

"Summers, status on our escorts?"

"Their almost on top of Alpha-1, captain."

"Alright, first see if we get a response within the next 30 seconds; Madison, read it to yourself, if you decide there is an immediate danger, you are to give Krasovic full weapon systems. That includes nukes and missiles. Summers, coordinate attack vectors, I want that battlecruiser dead right at the moment Madison decides that we're in jeopardy, and get our Fortress CIWS back up." Joe stated as he motioned his hands along the tactical system marking targets and setting weapons.

He entered the nuclear weapon stock access code to prepare for immediate use.

"Are we going to nuke the ground sir, should I give the retreat order?" Summers asked.

"No, I want to see if he is prone to deterrence."

"Sir, message receivedâ€| danger! Enemy is preparing to fire again, enemy escort craft are also inbound."

Open up! MAC cannons, fire! Full barrage, bring down the shields and fire the missiles and get us out of the central zone. Nuclear weapons are last resort!"

"Yes, sir!" Krasovic called as he took aim with every single cannon on the Alexander, most locking based on computer targeting systems following simplistic commands started to blast away at the 3 kilometer long warship.

The UNSC Alexander's twitch engines turned its velocity a full circle pointing the 900 meter destroyer toward the larger 3000 meter behemoth.

Howler and Rapier Missile Pods were lit as hundreds of cheap, but advanced and deadly missiles flew toward the silver and purple hued warship. Point Defense laser turrets peppered the shields of the enemy craft, and Onager Railgun cannons rippled as the Alexander fired in quick succession waiting as their bigger brothers prepared to line up to their target.

"Sir, weapons are hot and are being depleted gradually, shields are holding at 70% and the enemy has begun to return fire. CIWS is holding off plasma-based weaponry. Missile ammunition is at 68% and dropping. Our escorts have also open fired on the enemy craft. Nuclear weapons are ready for use if you choose, captain." Madison stated as he started highlighting weapons, ships, and anything of note between the warships.

On the tactical display, two UNSC destroyer escorts, former heavy destroyers before the end of the war changed their analogues designations. The two warships also began to open up, the Phoenix Reborn's main MAC cannon and pulse laser turrets began to sweep stray torpedoes and draw fire from the battlecruiser's secondary guns. The Goddess moved in toward the slightly damaged form of the British Columbia and protected the frigate from incoming fire as its shields continued to recharge steadily.

"Sir, I just got a subroutine package containing orders from the Napoleon with a shopping list per say on our mission doctrine from HIGHCOM, it looks like we're being passed the job since the Mogadishu's destruction." Madison stated a bit smug for some reason not known to Joe.

"What is priority?" Joe asked.

"We need Intel on the enemy's database and how much they know about us and whatever may be important to the UNSC. That's going to require boarding action, it just so happens the flagship is locked in combat with us right now. We're going to have to call off the kill shot; we're going to have to take the ship." Madison said smiling to himself.

"What's with the grin?"

"I just completed 78 games of Chess with the Napoleon's AI, Father Phillip; the old Christian wasn't much competition."

"Don't get too sucked into it, I need you here advising and taking orders."

"Of course, sir, I would never dream of jeopardizing our survival."

"Do AIs even dream? Wait, don't answer that, I don't care to know." Joe stated as he watched the tactical display table, the enemy's shields were drained to a current 43%, he was eventually going to have to call off the assault.

Nearby, Squadron Cupid had intercepted the Bravo secondary targets and were cleaning up the enemy group.

"Sir, how would you like to proceed?" Summers asked as she tapped on her data pad and started searching through units for deployment.

"Hmmâ€¦ would the ODSTs be able to handle a spacewalk?" Joe asked.

"No sir, they don't carry the quantity of gear required for

zero-gravity boarding; our ship's ODS'T population is still mostly ground side anyway, we're going to need more than that, Joe." Summers stated.

"Alright, XO Summers, do you have a suggestion?"

"We could deploy EDTs." Summers stated looking at Joe.

EDTs were Extravehicular Demolition Teams, groups of irregular combat teams trained specifically for zero-gravity encounters that had only appeared as a true military subgroup during the dawn of the Great War, former mercenaries paid by Insurrectionists to board, capture, or steal UNSC warships were hired or talked into training UNSC soldiers for such dangerous work, usually the mercenaries required lots of money to even consider training and it also made their job harder since they would be passing on traits to soldiers that may end up fighting each other in battle on different sides.

"Do it, then send in several marine teams via gunships once they secured an LZ."

"Right away, captain."

The warships continued to fire at each other, the Alexander got closer, its shields were starting to get more and more alarming as the enemy monster, 3 times the size of his own beast, was barring down, an all-to-familiar shock rocked through the ship as Plasma torpedoes impacted the mighty shielding of the UNSC destroyer.

"Madison, what had the message say?" Joe asked out of instantaneous curiosity.

"He stated simply: _Human, I am not afraid of your kind, you would never dare fire upon your own planet, you have a valued investment coming out of it, to me however, it is just one grain of rock among a sea of pebbles and sand._"

"Bastard loves to speak in metaphors doesn't he?"

"Yes sir, I don't think that is a normal thing among Jirilahanae though, sir."

"Agreed; get me contact with Colonel Howard, I want to know what the situation on the ground is like."

"Yes, sir."

Madison winked out of existence as the tactical display showed the Alexander line up almost parallel at 4 km with multiple escorts dishing out damage. This was the moment where Joe began to hold his breath.

...

"The soldier above all others prays for peace, for it is the soldier who must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war."- Douglas MacArthur (1880-1964), Former United States Army General, Field Marshall of Philippine Army, Medal of Honor Recipient, and Historic War Hero of the 20th century

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3. Foxhole

Hey guys, Chapter Three is now up. Recently I have gotten some reviews that probably need replies and answers. I'll do this Q and A Format:

Q:_Any pairings? â€" Guest_

A:_While I have nothing against inter-species relationships that occur in Mass Effect, the likelihood of these events are alien to me. No pun intended. This story will probably have an Ashley-Male Shepard Relationship. I find it the most reasonable, not including Liara due to her species unique biology, to use Williams because she sits outside of Shepard's true command chain due to her affiliation with the Marines and Shepard as a N7 serviced in the Navy as a liaison then later an officer. This story takes place around the prologue of Mass Effect 2, so Ashley is likely the only choice I'm willing to use, plus I prefer Ashley over the other romance choices. Also to make a point here, if there are any pairings they're going to be background jargon, they're not going to be central plot points since this is a military drama, not a sappy romance. By the way, I may keep both Ashley and Kaidan alive depending how it fits this story._

Q:_Will this UNSC include alien members or is it human only? â€" OMAC001_

A:_This is a singular human entity, the UNSC is the United Nations Space Command or United Nations Security Council, depending on your preference. The Sangheili and other Covenant races are their own entities, after all the war only ended 2 years ago, after all. The Citadel Species all are their own entities as well. There will not be any form of culture assimilations of drastic proportions at this time._

Q:_(Not actually a Question, more like reaction to chapter) summed up as: "There are no pacifists in the Human race after 2 years of peace and 3 decades of war." - Guests_

A:_Look at the after effect of World War One for the major belligerents. Many nations such as Britain or France had at first a large population influenced by nationalism and a degree of militarism, they thought war was a grand thing during that time. Following World War One, the League of Nations was formed to eliminate another World War and the populations were extremely anti-war. It took France and Britain, 3 nations and a good chunk of Europe to declare war on Germany. The 3 years before Pearl Harbor, 76% of the US population believed in staying neutral. If you think there is no anti-militarism going on among the human population at the time after an extinction-scale event, then you may need to rethink your case._

**Q: **_I don't think warships would have windowsâ€" I think you should get rid of them. â€" Guest_

**A: **_While I admit windows would seem impractical on a warship, or

any spaceship what so ever. However, windows are a necessity for any ship. If your ships external sensors and cameras are eliminated how you will be able to target your enemy? You would have to rely on windows to make out their enemies. I also mentioned that the ships' windows are protected by energy shields, solid plasma substitutes, and several meters of warship metal when in combat._

**Q: **_When will we get to the Mass Effect part of the crossover?
â€" OMAC001_

**A: **_Around Chapter 5 or 6, after the battle and establishing the current state of ONI as an intelligence community._

That is all the questions for now, I hope that helped the audience, now back to the story. Been also a bit tired lately with school and figuring out events going on at home. I've been having some thoughts about figuring about making this story more realistic, it still requires tweaking, sorry guys for the delays. A now this really isn't any excuse I can give since I promised you guys this chapter around three months ago, so simply, I'm sorry. I've also been recently coming up with concepts for several short stories and long stories, I'll get them post sometime in the next month.

One will cover the Citadel Council's horror following the Didact's attack on Earth and the proof that there will always be bigger fish out there. Another will cover the story of rogue Spartan-IIIs based off inspirations from Watch Dogs, X-Men, and modern controversy of the usage of child soldiers and human genetic tampering.

See you guys soon.

â€|

"_They may have been the big sausages back then; now we're the biggest dicks on the playground." _â€"Corporal Erick P. Vinokurov (2528-Present), vulgarly states in reference to the Covenant and Human relationship after the Great War when interviewed by a reporter for the Official UNSC Public Relations Organization â€"
2554

â€|

["Foxhole"]

[SGT Gary "Heart" Hartmann, UNSC Army]

[September 2555]

[Former Colony of Aragon, Glasslands]

â€|

Gary woke up feeling no less than a splattered cucumber.

His eyes were still shut tight from his previous encounter with the solid earth, his senses however were beginning to return to him.

The first thing he noticed was the feeling of being dragged across the ground with his arms and upper body in a sort of suspension with his blood seeping away from his arms slowly feeling like pins and

needles.

The feeling of the blood flowing away from his fingers suggested he had only started moving a few minutes a while ago, a smell of stale air filled his nostrils forcing Gary to take a few puffs and he heard a few dim winks as his HUD reacted to his awakening brain activity. Finally opening his eyes and taking a few small gasps of air to really get him awake.

The ground was only several inches from his head and he was moving at a slow, kind of a marching pace. Slowly, Gary moved his head upwards in a sort of zombie-like manner. At first, he thought that Raven and Sunshine had been kind enough to drag him along with them, but even looking up slightly gave Gary the shocking image of armored reptilian feet.

Slender, raptor bodies encased in carbon-fiber combat skins and metal plates, the Jackal captors dragged the stiff body of Gary across the ground in stealthy silence with the occasional thump of Gary's feet sliding across a rock or the soft crunching of grass under the Kig-Yars' feet.

Gary slowly moved his head to face his captor to his left, the beast was wearing a marksman-variant combat helmet and was focused on the direction ahead and remained dully unnoticing of Gary's seemingly limp body. Gary looked toward the other captor, an energy shield sat on its arm secured by a gauntlet and a Needler, one of the most feared Covenant small arms for its utter alien ammunition type that continued to baffle the science department of the UNSC.

Gary checked his vitals. No fatal injuries, his combat suit and harness had cushioned his fall due to impact and heat-resistant smart carbon fiber suits. His rib cage however had been shaken and had been bent a degree from impact that would leave in pain and with a nasty bruise until he could get some medical aid. Nanites were already working to repair the damage, human tech had reached the level where Nanites could remain in the body without harming or causing danger to the system and were extremely cheap and simplistic making them useless to anyone wishing to do harm from the inside.

Gary felt a fuzzy pain coming from his right abdomen due to the impact and his brain was everywhere, he possibly had a concussion though his vitals read negative on any lasting brain damage. His carbine limped along with him, a lucky break that the Jackals had been careless about an armed prisoner, possibly prey later if he continued to play dead.

His equipment was all securely attached to his body from what Gary could tell, but the ammunition left in his rifle was now down to an inconvenient 4 out of 28 rounds. That was enough to eliminate his two captors, he knew better thought that all sentient creatures had some form of packet mentality, it was the universal golden rule to advanced civilizations; without a group, no specimen can advance forward along the evolution chain without its kin. Here the same rule applied, in war, when there was a small group of enemies, there was without a doubt more nearby.

Gary was quick, he planted his legs firmly on the ground and pushed upward hard, lifting the slacking Jackals into the air several centimeters to their astonishment. Gary forced all his weight into

the small of his back as he toppled backwards on purpose, taking the raptor aliens with him. They slammed to the ground harshly for their size did not correlate for their weight. While heavier and stronger than Gary; Gary still had momentum and surprise on his side and gave him a slight edge over the two aliens.

Smacking the ground simultaneously, the Jackals instinctively let go of Gary. He drew his rifle and with quick reaction got his hand to the trigger house and the stock into shoulder fold and pulled the trigger in rapid secession and quickly emptied the clip as the rounds echoed into the air.

The first jackal was splattered in the head and abdomen with two well-placed shots, the second was quicker to react to the fall and was able to dodge the first bullet just barely grazing its shoulder missing its lower jaw and the second catching it in the left arm followed by a animalistic cry similar to a bird-of-prey's hunting screech. It drew a Plasma Pistol from its armor-magnetic clamp and attempted to pull the trigger. Before it could activate the notorious green glow of heated plasma, the Kig-Yar found a bullet in its head and quickly fell dead next to its kin.

Gary held his silenced sidearm as his MA9B sat vacated loosely at his side hanging by an extension cord. Gary heard distant screeches similar to the one that the Jackal had just produced combined with the sounds of distant gun powder, both snuffed and unsuppressed.

Gary did a quick 360-degree cover with his sidearm and found no more hostiles and secured the weapon in its holster. He pulled a fresh magazine from a pouch and ejected his spent carbine mag. Gary loaded the weapon and began to follow the sound of the gunfire, in the distance he was likely to find friendlies. Coincidentally, Gary's Heads-Up Display showed that his objective point was in the same exact direction. Several meters ahead, the tree terrain here was lessened and the hillside was more on a slant and mixed with granite rock forming a natural quarry. This was likely the place where the Forerunner site was, such relics were often hidden underground anyway.

Walking at a steady, but alert pace, Gary arrived near the firefight in a two-minute time span. Just around several spread out boulders and he would meet friendlies who were already being lit up by his monitor as ODSs, probably from the team that earlier required extraction.

Stopping for a second to prepare himself, Gary attempted to contact his fireteam; all three receivers were blown out or they weren't replying. Making sure it wasn't his reception that was having an off-day, he refreshed his marker twice and called into the microphone as the ODS several meters away dished out damage in a deadly standoff beyond the tree line. "Hello? Anyone copy?" Gary called into the mic.

The static continued. Based on Gary's position, he found that the ODS were on the other side of the clearing and a group of 20 assorted Covenant Loyalist ground troops engaging the special operations unit.

Gary looked to his left as he leaned against the boulder, he could

hear the squawking of Jackal chatter and the high-pitched squeals of Grunts as they died and yelled battle cries.

Suddenly, a light blue-white beam raced past Gary for a split second and dissipated. A round from a Covenant Beam Rifle, a weapon that fired a super-heated ball of plasma past the speed of sound guided by magnetic fields produced by the rifle as the projectile travels down the barrel.

It took a second before a flicker of sound similar to a spinning drill followed the round, a Jackal sniper armed with a Beam Rifle stood to Gary's right and was now rushing toward him. The creature slung the large marksman rifle over its frail but athletic body and brought its plasma pistol to bear.

Gary acted quickly and did a football dive toward the ground, two plasma spheres burned the spot at which he had been last leaning. The distinctive sound of the Plasma Pistol's hum began to fill the air like a swarm of angry bees. Knowing the tracking ability of the weapon, Gary rolled behind a tree and let the charged round impact the thick base before coming out of cover and opening up.

His carbine shot 3 shots, a quick set of pops that were quick to impact the dino alien's body. The creature hit the ground dead.

The rounds were harmonized with the dozens of rounds traveling through the trees nearby as the Covenant forces fired at the UNSC specialized infantry. Gary jogged through the brush and quickly dropped down seeing multiple Grunts and Jackals engaging ODSs hiding behind the granite boulders that lay scatter along the hillside. Patches of grass layered the grounds around them. Plasma bolts streaked through the air and bullets rained over Gary's head, if he ever stood at full height, it would only take a split second before he became a friendly fire casualty.

The ODSs seemed to be firing in suppression and ignoring taking aim at the enemy forces that had them pinned down. Gary held his breath and started firing precision shots at the legs of the attacking aliens.

One bullet, two bullets. A Grunt goes down.

A third, a fourth. A Jackal.

Five, six, seven. Two Grunts are wasted.

Eight, Nine, Ten. A Jackal armed with a Beam Rifle goes down.

Gary emptied his magazine and already the number of aliens had dropped from 20 to 15 or so. The ODS took peeks out of cover to look at their situation and noted the single soldier that lay prone in the dirt and brush silencing aliens as the plasma rounds splattered around them with the hissing of super-heated plasma.

The group suddenly pounced up from their boulders and started retaliating with increased vigor. Their heads went up as their rifles puffed in a mixture of semi-automatic and fully automatic fire. The enemy was overwhelmed by the sudden change in enemy tactics and the mystery of their lesser numbers not realizing that an Army Ranger lay behind their ignorant bums.

After some time had passed and the aliens had been beaten into submission when their Jackal command officer was dropped by a well-placed assault rifle round, the Grunts whimpered and ran as the Jackals went into a disarray trying to keep their allies in check while engaging the soldiers.

The ODSF approached Gary cautiously and watched the limp bodies of aliens and human alike that lay strategically across the combat zone.

Five Orbital Drop Shock Troopers armed with direct action equipment modules were escorted by a set of 8 Army Infantry units, some Army medics were busy tending the dead human bodies or tending wounds of the living. One ODSF approached Gary, likely the leader based on his armor plating marked with a dull, gray star on his chest brace next to his UNSC eagle and sphere.

"Staff Sergeant Aleksandr Kazakov, CO of Fireteams Orc and Lemur, 8th ODSF Battalion; what is your identification, soldier?" The ODSF asked in a heavy Russian accent.

"Sergeant Gary Hartmann, Fireteam Valor, Army Rangers, my team and I were sent to reinforce a team of ODSFs guarding a High-Value Objective; you, them?"

"Yeah, that's usâ€¦ Rangers; of all possible unitsâ€¦ where's the rest of your team, Sergeant?" Alek asked.

"Got separated, either their somewhere back in the forest or they're dead. Either way, I need to get you and your men out of here with the artifact."

"If you haven't noticed, the artifact is still in the cave, the items not going anywhere without out some heavy-lift gear, I take it you don't have anything with you that could do that?"

"Our Pelican got shot down, there's no way we're moving it then. I need to call this in, any chance we can get Command on the line?"

"None and zip, the structure's been giving off an artificial pulse of some kind that has us in the dark, dead zone goes on for 14 kilometers, there's no way we can radio command in this soup!"

"Then what do you suggest we do, Alex?"

"It's Alek, and no, I have no idea what to do besides hold this position. The area's has a high presence of Covenant foot-mobiles, we understand they want access to the structure." Aleksandr stated as he pointed in the direction of the large overhang with a dozen or so cave entrances seamlessly blending in with the shade.

"We hold the fort then until we can figure out a way to move the artifact."

"So be it, follow me we're locking down the place. We were waiting for you and your men to relieve us. Guess we're waiting a little longer then." Alek stated as he turned around and started marching toward the caverns. Gary linked his armor sensor suite to the rest of

the human soldiers and joined their ranks.

Alek gave an order by text across the HUD screen stating for everyone to move back into the caves. Medics rushed around as Army infantryman grabbed the bodies and injured and threw them on stretchers and walked them in purposeful orders much like insects. Following the ODS sergeant into the caves, the overhang passed over Gary's head and the shadows enveloped him as the storm overhead shook with another bolt of convenient thunder. In the dark, the wall was illuminated by a door of sorts glowing with silvery, blue light that sat out of place, the dirt and rock had morphed and crafted itself like a living organism around the Forerunner structure that made the aroma of the cavern grow drastically anxious, the building within gave off the feeling of new but ancient, a seemingly impossible description that left Gary baffled. He had about the feeling of being around Forerunner artifacts but this was the first time he ever saw one up close.

The Forerunners, an ancient race of righteous alien architects that loved their glowing white and blue lights and silver-colored walls had disappeared nearly 100,000 years ago; standing in the presence of their ruins was awe inspiring. These aliens were the center piece of the former Covenant religion and only recently had this knowledge become known to the public and general military when a major artifact was discovered by the Covenant under the African continent on Earth. It was still a hush-hush topic and covered in black ink, Gary knew very little about their technology except most of it being able to baffle even the best of human's scientists.

Now entering the structure, he found himself looking down a long, wide and seemingly larger-than-life passage adjourned by panels of black and blue light, supposedly the standard styles of the Forerunners.

"They must really love their pointless architecture." Gary stated.

"You have a tendency to state the obvious there, Hartmann?" Alek asked tilting his head to get a look at Gary, his visor depolarizing for a second revealing an annoyed face.

"No sir."

Alek remained silent and continued to lead Gary and the group of soldiers down the hall some having hushed conversations between each other or rushing around with a sense of duty.

"Sir, our comms are still down, the techies aren't sure how to fix the system to get around the artifact. It's actingâ€¦ strangely." An ODS said as he ran up to Alek and started walking alongside the Staff Sergeant.

"What do you mean strange, Nox?"

"It's like it's got a mind of its own, it continues to change its jamming signal every time we adapt our commands to its signal."

"Have you attempted to tamper with it in anyway?" Gary asked butting in to the two ODS's conversation.

"No, who are you?" The ODST, Nox or whatever stated.

"Army Ranger, call me Heart." Gary stated.

"Rangersâ€¦, alright, nice to meet you." Nox stated.

"Shut your trap, Nox. " Alek stated as they finally reached the end of the strange and dreadfully long corridor. They reached a door that simply vanished into thin air at their presence.

"Wow. "

"Cool, isn't it? Imagine getting your dick stuck when it reforms." Nox stated before chuckling to himself with the awkward cloud looming over Gary and Aleksandr.

"Why do they call you Nox?" Gary asked Nox as they entered the main chamber where multiple soldiers were loitering around.

"I'm supposedly helplessly ignorant. That is what Nox in Latin means, I think." Nox stated scratching his helmet for effect.

Gary just looked at him indifferently for a few seconds then turned to face the interior of the structure. Seemingly small compared to many of the stories of the large and god-like structures he was expecting, Gary was immediately disappointed.

The place was designed much like a stereotypical datacenter, large shelf like structures ran across the place like skyscrapers of a large city running row by row and sectioned off. The structures were molded into the ground and painted a blackish silver that served to designate the differences between the walls and the structures. They glowed with a sort of dusty, blue light and coincidentally all glowed toward the center of the room as if some spirit beyond was guiding them in a malicious dance. A lack of a better phrases simply ran along the lines of utter witchcraft. Nox walked away to go talk to his buddies off in one corner.

Around the room, Army soldiers and ODSTs were laying around on the floor, either bandaged from combat injuries or simply power sleeping. Some technicians were typing away at make-shift computers probably practicing their hacking skills against the self-aware structure computer that was years their senior, there was absolutely no way they were going to get anywhere with the machines.

Alek lead Gary over to the analysts at the computers and asked one of them, "How is the situation?"

"We got nothing, sir. The system is locked by a software unlike anything we've ever seen. I would get an AI to analyze the data I'm getting right now, but as you can see I don't have one."

"Alright then, if you get anymore developments, come get me."

"Alright sir."

Alek turned back to faced Gary and stated, "We're no closer to finding the cure for the taste of MREs than we are of cracking this

nut of a signal jam."

"When a machine is broken, if it's not software, its hardware." Gary rebutted and pointed toward the center of the room, a shrine like structure with an ominous orb made of digital hexagons.

"I don't think that's such a good idea to mess with such an old machine, we don't know what it even does." Alek stated as his visor depolarized again revealing the Staff Sergeant's face much better than before revealing a good amount of scarring along his aged face. He seemed to appear to be in his early 30s or late 20s, but with a mix of gray hair and guilt whiskers forming an unnoticed beard.

Suddenly, an ODSST ran to Gary and Alek from another station, likely the radar unit.

"Sir, 3 contacts moving quickly through the cave, they're approaching the entrance as we speak. We only just spotted them using thermal sensors. Normal radar and other conventional sensors are unresponsive."

"What's their designation?"

"Unknown, sir."

"Then get the guys on the door, we don't want our guests to feel uninvited." Alek stated.

The ODSST nodded and called to the rest of the soldiers in the room, 5 or 6 ODSSTs stood up and pointed their guns at the door. The Army infantry units readied themselves for the intruders.

The doors evaporated in thin air and the intruders entered the room cautiously.

Not Covenant, human forces. Three Army Rangers stepped into the room with their equipment muddled and scarred much like all the other soldiers in the Forerunner construct.

The lead one, Sunshine, quickly stated, "Thanks for the welcome, I didn't expect this much fanfare."

"Goddamn, Rangers. You're a bunch of fucking retards, at least your buddy here had a little more sense to not barge in an inconvenient manner." An ODSST stated as he motioned for everyone to lower their weapons.

"Heart, what the hell are you doing helping these orbital junkies, I hope you haven't forgotten the rule about Helljumpers." Sunshine stated as if he was a mother calling her kid out after they spilled their ice cream on the carpet.

"Shove off, sir." Gary called back as he turned to face Alek. "Army Rangers, Fireteam Valor, sent to reinforce you."

Alek nodded in mock-understanding and turned to Sunshine.

"Took you long enough, HALO-Jump cunt."

"I hope I did, Space Coffin."

"Hey both of you cut it out," York stated as he pointed at the Forerunner structures. "What's the situation?"

"Can't move the artifact, all objects are molded in place."

"Have you attempted to 'poke' it?"

"No." Alek deadpanned.

"Then let's try something, after all, nothing ventured, nothing gained!" Sunshine stated before walking toward the orb-shaped artifact at the center of the room.

Sunshine looked at the orb and simply stuck his gloved hand out and touched it. The hexagons suddenly revealed symbols at the touch of his armored palm. The object glowed a dim green and the orb flashed white twice. The light turned dark and in one brilliant flash, the entire room was illuminated in a 3D holographic display and a map began to project throughout the place as lines, spheres, and a multitude of shapes and structures of light intersected and connected between each other.

The lights danced and rotated around, the projections formed shapes and pictures of familiar items to Humanity's history. The lines were all wrong but the night sky was familiar, the human forces immediately recognized the formations.

Star Constellations mapped out by ancient humans, while the stars were not the same as that of Ancient Earth, they shared the same styles as the ancient practice of star mapping.

The structure's light was relatively quiet as the machine ran its course matching the stars and worlds together. Finally when completed, a bright red ball appeared with some strange holographic inscriptions nothing like that of Human language.

"I guess that's where we are." Raven stated at the projection.

A bright cropped line shot out from the orb of red glowing a deep orange and attached to another orb. The orb's color changed from white to blue. The blue orb flashed twice and then finally the projection changed to a set of alien symbols in an unknown assortment and disappeared from view.

"So what do you want us to do?" Sunshine asked after the projection flickered out.

There was no answer as the lights dimmed and the room became normal again.

Everyone was silent as they stared at the spot that the ancient alien's AI copy once stood.

A hatch in the ceiling evaporated and a metallic object about the size of a small dog or a large house cat hovered out of a compartment, the object had glowing blue and orange lights and trailed blue ozone exhaust as it moved, it had metal appendages that lacked an aerodynamic touch however was more inclusive of a cultural

designated structure made of fine points and thin, rounded bars and surfaces.

Reacting on instinct, Alek called the action as everyone aimed their weapons at the target. "Contact!"

The machine, a Forerunner robot ignored the humans and simply sailed off to a farther corner of the room and began to extract what seemed to be hard-light directly from the data centers around the room. It went down one shelf corridor and disappeared around the corner.

"Well that was a little obvious for an ancient race trying write a road mapâ€¦| Alright thenâ€¦| everyone got that message on record, correct?" Alek asked.

His question was met with a decent number of nods, he nodded in response.

"Sketchy, how's our systems?" Alek asked to an Army soldier working at a portable station.

"Back up and running, sir!" He stated as he typed away at a holographic keyboard.

"Alright as soon as you can, get a connection to command, I want those orders."

"Aye, sir." Sketchy, the infantry communications specialist, stated.

"Sir, unknowns entering structure, thermal imaging is updating as we speak, they'll be in here in 15 seconds." An Army signal officer stated.

"You heard him, line up men. Get your weapons at the ready."

The ODSs and Army infantry all took up defensive positions for the second time and aimed their weapons at the door. The station management left their stations to line the walls.

The doors, unlike before did not open at first, it was as if the unknowns at the door were not welcome into the structure.

Instead the dull sound of metal being smacked at quickly became rumbling of a great machine tearing down the wall. The sound stopped and the door held firm.

The temperature in the room began to rise according to Gary's digital thermostat counter, it stopped at a steady 54 Celsius or approximately 130 degrees Fahrenheit, the heat was beginning to seep into Gary's combat suit and he felt the oily liquid of sweat began to build up below the skin's surface. Without the suit maintaining his temperature, in a few minutes he would start to sweat

The door turned a dim red with an apparent red circle in the center, the structure held firm, but little by little, the door melted away.

Finally the mechanisms, seem to initiate a self-preservation protocol

and evaporated into thin air, alien troops stood at the ready behind the door with a plasma projector mounted where the door used to be.

The enemy had been melting their way through and were prepared with their numbers: the first wave was a group of energy shield gauntlet-armed Jackals standing in a 3 by 4 Phalanx formation. They marched forward cautiously and began to fire their weapons.

The human troops retaliated in control burst but found the enemy formation to effective and began to retreat deeper into the structure and using data center pillars as cover.

The group abandoned the equipment and fell back into the ruin, already two Army infantry had been eliminated.

"Grenades!" Alek called over the plasma and suppressive fire of the human rifles.

Four fragmentation explosives were tossed out from behind cover as the Jackal formation spanned out to form a wall. The reptilian aliens spotted the explosives and quickly spread themselves out as the grenades went off killing a good set of the enemy, the aliens were out in the open and were quickly picked off by the concentrated fire of the soldiers.

Gary found his reloading and firing had become a secondary care and had already depleted 3 magazines, he was down to his last.

Gary called, "Last mag!"

"MA9? Here's some more!" Raven called and tossed Gary two extra magazines from a downed companion.

"Thanks, Raven!"

"Thank him later, we got more enemies." An army soldier said from his own cover.

A group of fast moving Grunts armed with plasma grenades and Needlers rushed in like a wave of overzealous cultists on a Crusade. Only they just kept firing instead of blowing up like their usual suicide behavior.

The group of Jackals had thinned out by now and no losses had occurred after the other two Army soldiers went down. The Grunts were soon becoming a problem however, their increased bullet sponge-behavior and their excessive Needle-rounds were pushing the humans back.

Many of the enemy rounds were leaving scorch marks and indentions in the structures of the Forerunner chamber. Unlike the disciplined Elites, the Brutes likely supported the practice of making messes, it was their nature.

Pinned down and locked in a suppressing position, Gary found himself and his fellow soldiers locked in a position similar to the one they had been in when engaging the previous Jackal patrol, now the enemy had them in the worst possible scenario, close quarters combat.

Gary continued to fire in semi-auto rounds in blind suppression at the Jackals. No Brutes, but the lower ranking units of the Covenant caste system were still nothing to toy with.

"Sir, transmission received, still trying to clear it up, but it seems to be Command!" Sketchy called as he played with a gimmick on his tactical monitor on his forearm.

"Copy Sketchy, soldiers hold them off. Does anybody have deployable cover?" Alek called as the ringing gunfire filled the ancient tomb.

"No iron tarps accounted for, sir!" An ODST on the far side of the room called from behind a shotgun's crosshairs.

"Sir, new proximity target inbound, unknown party!" Sketchy called. "Message is too jumbled up, I can't get the frequency from command."

"Source of problem?"

"Unknown, either it's still emitting from the structure or the enemy has deployed signal jammers nearby!" Sketchy called over the rounds of machine gun fire and super-heated plasma spheres.

Gary peeked out of cover to get a look at the other side of the room, his face was nearly taken out by a Grunt armed with a Needler. The crystal impacted and indented its self in the metal structure nearly an inch away from his face. Quickly taking cover behind the shelf, the pink shard exploded and became dust and pink shrapnel.

Suddenly, another source of concentrated machine gun fire filled the ancient hall. The yelps and surprised agonized screams of Jackals and Grunts echoed through the ancient bunker.

Popping out with his MA9 at the ready, Gary was disappointed and somewhat surprised when another set of Army Troopers entering the structure armed to the teeth and catching the enemy off-guard.

For the second time in nearly an hour, the ODSTs and Army personnel of the Scout Taskforce had been rescued by friendlies using practical flanking tactics revealing the flaws and ignorance of the poorly trained units of the receding faction known as the Covenant Loyalists.

Alek led the entourage to greet the team of emergency responders. "Thanks for the reinforcements, are you the recovery team?"

"Yes, I take it you're Staff Sergeant Aleksandr Kazakov." The leader, a tough looking masculine Army soldier hidden behind a mask.

"Yes."

"Commander James Richardson, we were sent in after Fireteam Valor failed to report in. Grab your wounded and any equipment or artifacts that are mobile now, I'm now in charge of this operation, get your men to the vehicles, the Colonel wants all organized units back to the defensive lines ASAP."

"Yes sir, what about this alien structure, what are we do with it?"

"I have specialists working on that, you move to the trucks and you'll see what I mean; I'll explain more then."

"You heard the Commander, move it troopers!" Alek called as the defensive formation of soldiers rushed around and started to move stations out through the Forerunner passage and back into the humid atmosphere of Aragon.

Gary helped two ODST lift a heavy metal cylinder near the backside of the internal encampment, based on the distant continuous beeping and large metal protective casing, it was a standard UNSC deep-seismic scanner used for mining or tracking underground structures like the said Forerunner bunker or tomb.

It didn't weight too much, but it was more than a challenge for two or three physically superior human space warriors. Gary and the ODSTs were silent as they walked up until they stepped out back into the daylight.

The storm overhead continued to shake the air and rumble with increased vigor as alien combat machines fought human aircraft.

Gary and the ODSTs walked up to the hind side of an open-bed Warthog Jeep, steadily and slowly the three men lifted and pushed the valuable equipment into the truck bed and restrained it down with ropes.

Gary looked up toward the cliff side and saw a few dozen men and women setting up a complex entanglement of wires and explosives over the rock face.

They were going to bury the structure.

Gary didn't say anything and recognized the necessity of hiding the HVT location. The structure was too valuable to be given access to the Covenant, it was better that they lose the opportunity to the structure now instead of losing all access later to a larger enemy platoon. Gary jogged back to the cave entrance and helped Army soldiers drag enemy corpses out and into a pile by the trucks. Jackals, Brutes, and Grunts had been piled high together in a large mound. Some guys were taking spare cans of gasoline and spraying the bodies down with the highly flammable fluid. A giant bonfire, a mass grave; it was a barbaric way to dispose of the enemy, but it was surely efficient, the plus side was that the constant humidity and rain would mask the smell of smoke leaving little clues for tracker teams of Brutes and their pet Chupacabras.

The Commander walked up to the bon fire and took out a pack of matches, he scrapped the match across the metal fire starter until it sparked and then with a lazy swing of his arm, he tossed away the match and took 5 long strides back.

The mound of alien bodies was suddenly engulfed in a large fireball before crackling a bonfire to life. The oil-based fire continued to burn even in the face of intermediate showers.

Behind Gary, Nox and Sunshine could be heard whooping and hollering,

and possibly a determined high-five.

The group all stared at the bonfire for a few minutes before the Commander's voice reached everyone's ear drums.

"Blow the cliff, Sergeant!" Richardson yelled and Gary looked toward the cliff. The Army soldiers had already climbed down from the overhang cliff. The walls of the hillside exploded with sparkling gray and brown dust as the rocks and dirt were engulfed in some and the explosions. A cracking sound was heard fall by an echo made of thousands of grinding thuds of rock and stone crumbling down in a rock slide of artificial circumstances.

The dust cleared after a minute revealing a completely concealed cliff looking more like a natural quarry than a possible cave system.

"Alright, all Army and Marine personnel, to the trucks!" Alek called with a reply of a dozen or so "Yes, sirs" and "ayes."

The group climbed into the truck convoy. A set of open-top Warthog supported a few Cougar combat trucks. Most soldiers climbed into the back of the Cougars, Gary and some Army soldiers from Richardson's unit. Gary grabbed ahold of the top heavy machine gun, a step down from the standard issue anti-aircraft chain gun of most Warthogs, this one was a transport variant and instead used a smaller heavy machine gun to support against enemy units.

The fireteam sitting in the back of his Warthog was led by a young woman in Marine combat garbs, her IFF tag labeled her as Sergeant Hillary Manzo, Marines. While the same pay grade as Gary, she technically had seniority over him as a Marine team leader.

"Sarge, good to have you here." Gary stated as the convoy began to move toward the trees.

"Likewise Ranger, names Manzo, callsign, Sierra. What's yours?" She stated in an attempt to have formal introductions.

"Gary Hartmann, Sergeant, call me Heart."

"Aye, you're the guy with Fireteam Valor?"

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Your CO is a pansy, or at least a man-child." Sierra stated.

"That's the usual belief." Gary replied.

"How do you deal with him, he seems crazy."

"You get used to him after a few years, not the best years of my life, but certainly interesting none the less."

"Cool story bro." She stated as she looked onward toward the main battlefield. "Must suck to be those guys on the frontlinesâ€|"

"Heard they had some extensive casualties when taking on the

Covenant encampment."

"They did, it was a bloody shoot out; we eventually forced the enemy into their trenches using sheer numbers and blitzkrieg tactics. Not even a well-organized line force could handle the mess we got out there."

I take it you were out there with them?"

"Yeah, saw at least 15 boys lose their heads out there."

"Decapitation by plasma?"

"Yep, not a pretty sight."

The conversation pretty much ended there as the forest continued to pass by them. The calm breeze being filtered into Gary's suit helped calm the adrenaline in Gary's system and the numbness in his soul. Sweat was pouring down Gary's face, he ignored it and instead watched the skies and the makeshift road around them. No enemies appeared.

Gary could make out many shapes among the cloudy sky, many atmospheric fighters and Covenant fighters. The Human forces were outnumbered but dominated in skill against the aerial adversaries. Above the dogfights in the sky, the UNSC Assault ships, Fleet tenders, and escort frigates provided close and precise air-to-ground ordinance support negating the need to deploy Vulture heavy assault craft.

Gary thought he could see a Covenant Cruiser also in the clouds but shook the thought away as just combat jitters.

He continued to monitor the road as the trees began to part revealing the plains once again.

Out in the distance, Gary made out the images of large retreating Covenant fast-mobile infantry and UNSC blitzkrieg columns playing a wave-tactic style game of cat and mouse.

The UNSC forces had gotten so far forward against the enemy units that it seemed that the enemy was to be simply annihilated and the battle all but won. The enemy's numbers were shortened to around a third of the enemy army structure that had been there about 30 minutes ago. Large craters and smoldering fires raged across the savannah, a suggestion that the enemy was more likely destroyed by precision strikes by air to ground kinetic rounds, cluster smart bombs, and low-yield, non-nuclear guided rockets.

In 5 minutes, Gary's convoy would be absorbed by the collective of UNSC built up at the edge of the woods.

Sierra, the Manzo girl, suddenly started yelling, "Stop the trucks! Stop the trucks!"

Her order was followed, the convoy slowed to a halt. A rumbling sound was emitting through the air.

"Everyone down!" Gary heard the Commander call. Soldiers in the

open-top vulnerable hogs quickly jumped out and hit the dirt. A few remained in the jeeps including Gary as he swiveled on his turret.

He did not see anything, but he heard it.

Gary looked up and in sheer horror was awestruck by the epic insertion by great Covenant behemoths.

5 pops consecutively ruptured through the sky and out of the blackened clouds, like hell had fallen from the heavens in the most ironic way possible. 5 enemy Scarab Heavy Assault Platforms crushed the air around them and impacted the ground below them with a mighty crunch. Their purple, bug like bodies were a great shine and scar in the landscape. A shockwave ran out through the air crushing the air in Gary's lungs and making the convoy rumble for a millisecond.

Smoke rose from their craters and visible energy shields flickered off their bodies. Five Covenant tanks had just landed in the middle of a battle from sub-orbit that had shocked the entire UNSC in a mighty display of natural forces and alien ingenuity.

Suddenly, the behemoths rose from the grounds they had appeared from and as one, their adjourning lights of death flickered on and the shields fizzled away. Then they attacked.

As one the machines rose on top of their four gigantic insect-styled legs and their head-mounted turrets glowed with green plasma. They marched toward the UNSC staggered lines. While the Scarab tanks were menacing on their own, these menaces were nearly twice to three times the size of normal Scarab classes. Based on their size, Gary guessed they were Super Scarabs, rumored enemy attack platforms that could level cities and without the guide control of the Hunter worm colonies, it was entirely mechanical. It did not matter to the UNSC however, anything Covenant that moved was to be considered a threat. Gary tapped himself into all available communication relays across the battle net.

A voice registered as Hades-Actual, a Marine unit, was yelling, "They're right on top of us, Five Type 47 Supers!"

The Colonel replied, "Hades, get your men out of the kill box! Everyone, find cover, get out of the open!"

Hades-Actual sputtered with radio static, "Enemy is rightâ€"top of usâ€"being overrun on this positionâ€"get that laserâ€"warthogs eliminated, we'reâ€"finisâ€"!"

A light flashed as green plasma from one of the Super Scarabs ripped apart of the UNSC forward fortification followed by dirt and mud being cooked and releasing methane gas into the air. Even from a kilo away, the stench of ozone could punch a hole in Gary's filters as he releasing a small gagging reflex.

The storm overhead was suddenly vacant of UNSC craft, enemy fighters were high tailing it out of the region.

"All units prepare for kinetic strike, warning: danger close. I repeat danger close."

The warning rang through all UNSC communique but already the retreat order was too late. UNSC forces were consumed in plasmatic fire as they attempted to escape the massive hulking alien walkers.

Gary watched from his perch as green plasma was poured onto the retreating dots of UNSC ground forces, smoke rose into the air. The smell of burning flesh and ozone. The screams for help that echoed in the radio domain. The cries of death roaring across the burning plains.

The line of enemy units had reorganized and converged on their hulking support. The UNSC line of armor and steady infantry had been utterly crushed. Now the Covenant marched into the human forces cowering under the giants' fists.

Then there was Humanity's answer. A roar from the heavens. The sky and clouds were lit up and for a second it was as if there was a second sun. Tiny, but still a second sun.

Then with the great fireball followed by a smaller explosion that lit the clouds, kinetic rods raced from the shadowy phantoms of UNSC warships toward the ground around the hulking Scarab tanks. The earth shook and smoke and dust rushed into a great cloud bank blackening the area as the cloud rode the shockwave of the explosions. Craters and fire erupted and the entire savannah was blackened with smoke.

Gary watched as the cloud bank raced toward him and time seemed to slow down. He felt a rush of wind and his head smacked cushioned by his reinforced combat cap and simultaneously knocked him dizzy. He was enveloped by the cloud and next thing he knew, he was flying.

He hit the ground with a loud smack and he thought he may have heard something crack. Gary's head swam, he saw his vision bounce as he saw a few masks and visors popping through the darkness. Gary found his hand suddenly grasping a smaller, petite hand, a female's hand.

The hand pulled and Gary pulled back. He rose off the ground and quickly found the smoke going high into the air and being unable to see anything past the Warthog and group of Army soldiers in the area around him. The hand he was grasping was Manzo's hand. He pulled back and nodded to her. She nodded back.

Gary activated his armor maintenance system and checked his equipment. There was nothing wrong with the electronic suite, nothing wrong with his health, no damage to his armor. He looked at the ground where he had impacted to find a large tree branch shredded under his armored suit.

Guess it was a false alarm.

Gary ran back to the Warthog and climbed on to the HMG turret as the other Army soldiers piled into the seats around him. The driver and his navigator turned the vehicle over as the familiar purr of the Warthog's engine echoed in the dark smoke and sleet of earth as the lights illuminated into the darkness. The Warthog's engine was harmonized with the roar of the Cougar transports coming online behind Gary.

Commander Richardson's voice came on the speakers, "All units, forward. Keep together and follow the selected path, no detours and for the most part; keep your heads down!"

The convoy restarted and began their trek back to the frontlines in an orderly fashion.

As the convoy moved through the blackness of soiled air, Gary saw the numbers of Covenant forces beginning to awaken from the kinetic bombardment. UNSC forces were decimated and spread thin. Gary made out figures around him as units clashed along the path.

A Cougar's external audio amplifier suddenly came on, "This is Commander Richardson of Blacksmith Company; all Human forces are to move to the planed extraction points. Convoy vehicles 3 and 6 are to diverge to target points Romeo Lima and Hotel Delta."

A pair of Cougars diverged from the group and disappeared into the cloudbank.

War was hell. Gary noticed multiple scenes as he strained his eyes to make out the aliens and humans around the convoy.

A pair of ODS'Ts lacking helmets sat behind a crushed warthog as Grunts bum rushed their position with plasma grenades. Gary rained some fire support as he passed by giving the ODS'Ts time to jump onto the top side of a Cougar's roof as it steadily passed by.

The warthog wreckage exploded in a blue fireball as dropped plasma grenades from Suicide Grunts blew the cart sky high.

In the distance, Gary's targeting computer made out a single Scout Sniper along in a bush firing in rapid secession on his DMR as his active camouflage tarp had been soiled by dirt living him in a drastic position as Jackal snipers returned fire with their beam rifles every few seconds.

The sniper disappeared into the fog and Gary lost sight of the man after a few seconds on his motion tracker.

An ODS'T and Marine in a stolen ash gray Revenant raced by the convoy as two Ghosts; make that one Ghost following one being torn up by a Grenade Launcher mounted on a Cougar. The Revenant headed north and also disappeared into the darkness.

A group of Army soldiers had commandeered an enemy Wraith and was blasting at a group of Brute Chopper bikes fortified behind a large husk of a destroyed Super Scarab.

A Marine woman around 5 feet was holding the body of a fallen Marine comrade and crying under a tree. It seemed that the enemies had mostly ignored her position but were likely to converge on her once she was found.

Overhead, Gary could hear the familiar rumbles of UNSC Vultures and Pelicans as they moved to their designated pick up spots.

Out of the corner of Gary's vision, a blue pulse erupted out of the smoke. A beam of energy soared a mere foot over his head from a hidden Jackal Sniper armed with a Beam Rifle.

Gary quickly turned the machine gun to face the shots direction but failed to spot an enemy target of any kind. A soldier behind Gary yelled, "Sniper, get down!"

A second shot rang out. This shot smashed into the side of the carriage of the Transport Warthog and dissipated. The third shot was expected yet it still hit home.

The third went off and pulsated over the carriage top, past the armored carbon fiber top and met a round object of flesh and bone. A splattering sound echoed through the truck's cargo bay.

Gary ducked down and looked behind him, Sierra, Manzo, whatever she called herself. The round of plasma splattered through her skull and out the other side.

A large gaping hole was all that was left of her skull before her entire cranium caved in and simply denigrated into fine dust. Nothing was left except the charred neck and the protective suit that attempted but failed to protect its now dead user.

Gary freaked, the gory image and remains while similar to what he had seen during the Great War, each time was the same. He gagged and nearly vomited into his suit. He gulped it back down and for a second, his throat felt a burning sensation. He looked around the cargo hold as the noise of the convoy moving and the battle around them seemed to be drowned out. A masked Army trooper made eye contact with Gary and quickly turned to grab a safety/fire blanket from under a seat. They improvised and Gary did his best to wrap her corpse into the large black fire-retardant sheet. There was no blood, the plasma had burned away everything around her skull and upper spine with only the ash left and charred pink goo and cloth. They lifted her body and was about to lay her on a stretcher when Gary heard a raging inaudible cry, something animalistic.

Suddenly, Gary's blood seemed to boil. He rose quickly and dropped Sierra's corpse to turn to the HMG mount. A Brute had jumped on the Warthog windshield and was blasting an energy dagger into the wind shield with a plethora of holes in the synthetic-diamond glass. The driver attempted in vain to shake the creature off the front of the vehicle but failed. Gary quickly acted and set the creature on fire using his loaded machine gun. Rounds peppered its body and with a single second of continuous fire, the body went limp; crashed onto the hood of the Warthog and slide down under the jeep. A few bumps of the body were heard and some seats were periodically raised. Next thing you know, the body was gone and behind them.

Gary turned back to the corpse of Hillary Manzo, she had been laid across the stretcher and moved to the center of the bed. Gary nodded to the soldier that had helped him move her body. He watched her form for a second without any sign of emotion, he didn't cry or yell or whimper. He just stared at her. Another person he knew for a few minutes, gone. A growing list of people to bury and a growing list of names that would be etched into his mind for the rest of his existence. The names ran alphabetical, inverse alphabetic, scenario marking, chronological, etc.

Manzo was only one of dozens of hundreds of people he would never now but keep asking why he lived and they died. He put the thoughts away

and into the back of his mind and turned back to the turret. Reality slowed down around him, his mind treating him like he was in the middle of a movie or a picture book just waiting for the reader to turn the page. Everything was centered on him and gravitated toward him. Gary held the metal of the gun in his two gloved hands with extra vigor, they seemed to be the only things anchoring him down to the ground.

Gary took a long, deep breath. He closed his eyes and released. He opened his eyes and caught himself; Gary watched everything around him and kept his eyes on the ball. He looked for a target, any alien that dared get close. Nothing came. He spent the rest of the ride keeping his eye on the cloud banks around him making sure nothing got near the Warthog.

Everything was silent except the sound of the wheels, engine, and the rattling of guns shooting their ammunition at each other through the debris.

Finally, they arrive at the extraction point a pair of Pelicans guarded by a team of Marines armed with M739 SAWs, suppressing anything alien before it got too close.

The convoy's guests marched out of their vehicles. Two Army soldiers grabbed the stretcher of Sierra's body and lifted her remains to an awaiting Pelican. Gary was the last out of the vehicle choosing to make sure nothing got too close. Once he was sure the area was secure. Gary got out and lifted his trust MA9B, the weapon now cool from the lack of use for the last few minutes of travel. The warthog pilots moved their jeeps behind the VTOL Pelican dropships and used a universal lift crane to restrain the reconnaissance vehicle to the combat aircraft. The rest of the convoy moved on to the next extraction point and left the rest of the soldiers at the Pelican landing site. Gary was one of the last to climb into the gapping cargo bay of a Pelican designated as Raptor Two-Six.

Gary climbed in and noted the lack of seats for him. Gary sat down on the floor and used a restraining belt from the floor to attach him to the ground with several other poor souls forced to cram themselves next to the wrapped corpses in an assortment of bodybags, blankets and other material sheets improvised from equipment. One body was even wrapped in the cloth of a Warthog's carbon fiber canopy wrap.

Gary sat down on the hard metal and watched as the Pelican rose out of the darkness and into the sunlight and mostly cloudless rain. The sun had finally broke through the cloud bank and the yellow star of this solar system provided excess heat and light that both blinded and made Gary sweat a little on contact. He watched as the smoke below continued to block out the ground. A rumbling pasted by the Pelicans as they took off, five UNSC outdated but not yet phased out Short Swords roared by and dropped napalm explosives into the dark smoke lighting the black haze into a burning inferno in a somewhat straight line. Even from above, Gary could smell the burning napalm and the smell of burning flesh, Gary could swear he heard the screams of dying aliens and for a second Gary felt satisfied.

He watched as the Pelican's bay doors close and felt the internal atmosphere accommodated the passengers. A louder rumbling of the engines suggested that the craft was preparing to exit the

atmosphere. Retreating to the UNSC Alexander, a destroyer in the high atmosphere awaited Gary and his team. The battle had reached its climax, all in a day's work.

On a private channel, Gary logged into a military chatroom meeting the voices of Sunshine, Raven, and Fork. A new voice, the voice of a Colonel Howard of the UNSC Army spoke, "Good job men, I knew I could count on you!"

Altogether, Fireteam Valor spoke, "Thank you, sir."

"Target Foxhole secure, men good to have you back. Get to the Alexander and get some rest, you deserve it."

"Yes sir." The team said together.

"Sir, what was the value in Foxhole anyway?" Gary asked. He received multiple green winks from the rest of the fireteam registering the same question.

"The base was only located, the R&D department still hasn't had time to go over the footage and information from the Forerunner ruin but we detected the structure by following Covenant transmissions. We treat artifacts such as Foxhole as important locations of value, the Forerunners have a lot of technology laying around and it's ours for the taking. Better us than the Covenant to get ahold of it and reverse engineer it first. That's why Foxhole was so important even if I think it's a Mike Foxtrot of a reason myself. Good luck boys, I'll see you for debrief in an hour."

"Roger that." Sunshine said and the chatroom logged itself out. Gary closed his eyes and waited for the feeling of artificial gravity to take hold. All in a day's work.

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"_War is not a hobby, it's a necessity. For survival, for prosperity, for existence. We fought the Covenant so that we might still have the chance to exist; so that we may still have a place in God's Universe_." â€" General Carlson Lomeli, (2486-Present), UNSC Army General quoted in a 2555 circa. History Textbook on the Great War Era.

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On another note, just out of curiosity, would you guys mind if I posted a Codex story separate to this that covered the details of factions and characters in this story. I want your opinion, leave it in the reviews or PM me.

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4. Requiem

**Sorry guys, the anniversary of this story has come and gone, and I have yet to take off the training wheels. Please forgive me for the slow delivery. I'm hoping once I've got my schedule between SATs, PSATs, AP courses, and the Swim Team sorted out, that I'll get back to the writing. I expect that I may dish out a bunch of one-shots

soon to get over a hill in my stead of a figurative Writer's cold. I'm down for the count until otherwise but soon, the Mass Effect and Halo factions will meet head to head in an adventure unlike that of any other Halo story. Small scale but no less epic, thanks for sticking around for so long guys. Please Read and Review!**

****See You Guys Soon!****

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"_In wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies." _â€" Sir Winston Churchill (1874 â€" 1965), Former Prime Minister of the European State of Great Britain, former British Army Officer, and Scholar stated in an epigram quote during the second World War - 1944

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****["Requiem"]****

****[CPT Opal McKinley, UNSC ONI Prowler Corps]****

****[September 2555]****

****[Slipspace-Unknown, Glasslands]****

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It was rather interesting; the majority of Humanity, even with 500 years of interstellar travel capabilities, over 200 colonies, and a genocidal war against the species, most Humans had never witnessed Slip space first hand.

Opal McKinley, captain of the Prowler Spacecraft, UNSCS Loki's Will, wondered how many artists in the private sector still failed to grasp the simple scientific understanding of faster-than-light travel. When traveling at the speed of light, the cosmic background radiation becomes visible to the naked eye and the visible universe becomes a grey "tunnel-vision" spectrum of light particles.

While the actual occurrence is reduced in Slipspace due to wormholes lacking the same laws of physics that pertain to that of the regular reality plane, the reality bubble surrounding the ship traveling through Slipspace still contains bits of regular matter from the regular plane of existence. Due to a reduced effect of Slipspace Tunnel Vision, some parts of the Slipspace wormhole reality can become visible, however, the actual reality is nothing but a swirling cyclone around the bubble with continues shades of blue and gold overlapping each other down the wormhole. The uninformed artists tend to imagine the Slipspace domain as a rehash on the science fiction design of Hyperspace or the Jump Drive tunnels from old science fiction works such as that of Star Wars or Star Trek.

Currently, Opal was looking out the polarized plasma and diamond encased bridge window of the Loki's Will. The grey spectrum remained endless and dull and the white spot at the center did little to help her dancing eyes and trance-like state as her mind wandered with the figurative breeze, lost to the winds.

The quiet bridge, while full of busy ONI employees and Navy

personnel, the silence of the ship's bridge except for the clatter of workstations did little to wake the Captain from her stupor as she sat in her seat of power at the center of the bridge. The ship's personal AI was nowhere in sight on its assigned pedestal.

It was quiet enough and the room was dark enough that if Opal were to fall asleep, no one would likely care; in the Prowler Corps, many Captains were required to always be on high alert, most never got more than 3 hours of sleep from rotations. It was also protocol for the Captain to never be put into cryostasis unless extreme scenarios required the action to occur. ONI had made great strides to keep their stealth fleet at the most optimized condition possible; they only recruited the youngest and brightest of the officers that came through their halls and made sure to break and rebuild their characters from scratch to be the perfect robotic-like figurehead of a spy ship. There was even a mandatory retirement age of 35 so that many of the Captains were used up to their potential and then forced into early retirement and told to keep a zero-tolerance silence agreement to maintain the secrecy of ONI operations.

Currently, the day-trance that Opal was stuck in would probably be the best amount of sleep she would get for the next 48 hours. The only problem was she could not really let her mind wander and her subconscious to take control; so now, she was stuck reliving the major events of her life recently.

The space around her fades from her vision and dissolves to be replaced by a new scene, one swept with rain, lightning, and thunder. The dull and continuous drum of the sky above is endless. The area that she stood in was a scene of grave misfortune, the military funeral congregation had made it to the Earth-based Arlington Cemetery, home to the dead of over 700 years of war. The many blurred faces of the other attendees had not improved with memory. The storm obscured the military officers that had come to see off the deceased. The dead being an important individual, the carbon-fiber umbrellas rose above everyone's heads like a jungle canopy keeping out the rain in reflective fashion. Opal had stood in the front row and watched as the UNSC ceremonial Marine Corpsmen in the 21st-century-style dress whites covered in leathery-black waterproof trench coats similar to combat ponchos worn on the field in heavy rain that doubled as reflective stealth coatings. The flag of ONI with the Odin's All-Seeing Eye and triangle as an allusion to ONI's American heritage were ceremonially folded by the Marines and then passed to a teenage girl nearby whose face was similarly masked by the rain; the girl was a family member based upon Opal's assumption.

The Marine Sergeant in charge of the Marine ceremonial contingent made a hand motion and his hand lit up reflecting his signal to the Ceremonial Guard of Arms.

"Present Arms!" The Sergeant yelled into the storm.

Somewhere nearby 12 MA37 Army Assault Rifles were brandished with a loud clack that echoed like thunder before the guns were aimed skyward and the blanks were fired with effect, at least a few people in the crowd gave off a slight jump at the loud crack that struck the skies louder than even Thor's Hammer ever could.

The Sergeant again motioned his hands and a few loud clack of boots and weapons, the group of Ceremonial Guards marched off and the

Sergeant stoically joined the crowd.

A coffin was brought forth, even in the dark and bleak rain, the chest glowed an ominous obsidian black. 5 Golden Stars were adjourned in a pentagonal formation around a golden eagle in the center of the shape represented service to the UNSC, the group that brought the box forward halted before the Marine Sergeant and an Army General; the Army man stepped forward and the box was lowered to waist level. The Army General's face was for convenience illuminated among the silent crowd of mourners, he was a gruff man with a buzz cut with dozens of wrinkles and scars that circled his faces. His features were not very important, the symbolic medallion was taken into the man's hand, a square piece of solid gold gleaming in the dim lighting, a bronze fist held three bronze arrows in its place. The General took the medallion and forced the object into the coffin wood. Behind the General stood a man taller than 6 foot with a build noted for Spartan stature. He had tattoos across his bald skull in a similar design, a fist full of arrows.

The General stepped back into the crowd and let the coffin-bearers pass as they lowered the death box into the ground, at the head of a tombstone, one large and made of pure onyx and adjourned with polished granite. The name in gold was reflective in the stone: "Admiral Margret O. Paragosky, former director of the Office of Naval Intelligence and the Rough Woman who stood firm in the Darkness so we could sleep soundly at Night."

The coffin was lowered into the ground and quickly buried by a couple of service drones equipped with shovels. The grave was patted down and a man dressed in sermon robes stepped forward. To Opal this was a surprise, Christianity was still considered one of the most popular religions in the 26th century, but, religion was now mostly in the decline.

The priest began his sermon. "We come together today, in the waning days of the War, we busy ourselves with the recollection of our dead, the recovery of our past and the remnants of Man's Society. The Spirit of Mankind has not been extinguished at the hands of the Beasts from beyond the Heavens. The Storm has past and God has not abandoned us in our most desperate hour. He gave us many powers to defend and protect ourselves from the False Prophets' followers. The Mighty Lord has given us competent leaders that have led and guided us in the darkness and have restored the Light. Among the greatest heroes of Man, is the one who made the ultimate sacrifice, the reason why we gather here today. Margret Orlenda Paragosky, former director of the Office of Naval Intelligence, and without her guidance, we would have never have had survived this War. We would not be here gathered today without her sacrifice. She gave up her Humanity and her Soul so that she could lead Mankind into the Future. She was a gift of God's hand, a spawn of Destiny. With her passing, Humanity's future is bleak. We will mourn your passing, Madam; may the Lord show you prosperity at the gates of Heaven."

The priest, surprisingly lacking Biblical quotes in his sermon, backed away from the front of the congregation and also disappeared into the crowd. The group of mourners stood in silence under the umbrella canopy for another 10 minutes before the group began to disperse into individuals and small groups. The Army well-wishers marched off into the storm, the Marines stepped to the side in formation ignoring the rain that beat at their skin, the ONI officers

lingered as they spoke to their new head: a young but Spartan-sized lady, a Rear Admiral Serin Osman, a person that knew the deceased Admiral as personally as Opal, if not more. Opal looked toward the sky as she purposely allowed her umbrella to retreat her eyes were met with dozens of droplets of liquid water bullets. She blinked several times as the rain poured across her face and she quietly searched the Heavens for a sign of the God spoken so highly of by the Priest.

She saw and recognized nothing of any sign. The sky continued to lighten with lightning and erupt with the sound of thunder. The rain appeared endless.

"Captain McKinley, was it?" A voice asked.

Opal looked to the speaker. Rear Admiral Osman was now in her face with a seriously scrunched expression drawn upon her face.

"Ma'am?" She asked as she saluted out of habit to a superior officer.

"At ease, Captain. I understand you were a member of the Old Admiral's inner circle." Osman stated without emotion stating more of fact than opinion.

"Yes ma'am."

"Did she ever mention how I was chosen as her successor?"

"No ma'am, permission to speak freely?"

"Affirmative."

"No one knew the Admiral well, she never mentioned family, she never appeared to have a life outside the military, and she didn't even leave her flagship or ONI headquarters unless she was called upon for an official meeting among the Admirals. Very few people got to call her friend, however, even to her 'friends,' she was greatly detached without a care for anyone in the world."

"Understood, Captain. I was simply curious of how much people knew about my relationship with the Margret." Osman stated without breaking contact or a sign of emotion protruding from her lips, however, a knowing glint appeared in her eyes for a split second, a competitive shine. "I hope it's possible we'll be able to work well together in the coming years, Captain, I will be in touch. Consider today paid leave." The tall Rear Admiral turned on her heel and walked toward an old woman in a large hooded cape with an umbrella at the edge of the remnants of the procession.

Opal did not intent to listen to their conversation, however, she somehow drifted without her own accord and succeeded in hearing some of the conversation between the two people.

"Ma'am, how's early retirement?"

"Surprisingly boring, maybe I should have waited a few more years before staging my own assassination. I need to leave soon, seeing my grave stone makes me feel lightheaded. I'm surprised not to seem them all trying to jump on the grave." Stated the hooded woman, an elderly

lady walking with a cane but an obscured face.

"It was your idea to pass the torch down to me, I've taken to my duties as you requested with upmost efficiency. Where do you plan to go now?"

"I'm thinking of a self-imposed exile to Siberia, I think waiting out my days in a snowy environment will be a good change of pace when I've lived most of life in space."

"Self-imposed exile?"

"Something of the sort. You have taken the reigns, I trained you specifically for this moment. Make me proud Serin."

"I hope never have to watch my own funeral with the way you look, ma'am."

"You better hope so, you have no idea what it does to your health." The old woman in the cloak said and coughed a little.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll have two ONI Marines escort you back to your transport and your retirement fund should be ready by the time you reach Russia tomorrow morning. It's been an honor."

"Likewise, Serin. I'm sorry I couldn't give you a childhood. I'm sorry what Halsey did to you."

"I never had a childhood and Halsey can go to Hell for what she's done. You shouldn't be apologizing for anything. Ma'am it's been good knowing you, Humanity will be taking a blow without your guidance."

"And I'm sure you'll be able to make up for my absence. Do me proud, Rear Admiral Osman."

Opal was mostly confused on what she heard but didn't have much time to comprehend the conversation as the woman and her escorts left the premises of Arlington Cemetery and Osman walked back toward her crowd of ONI officers to prepare for the new administration. The words jumbled together and whatever she heard, Opal just assumed most of it was her imagination.

Opal quickly joined the other intelligence officers of ONI and began to intently listen to the tall Rear Admiral's words. The young admiral began to speak and with her voice the rain around Opal became fog and the voices of the people around her became distant only to fade to nothing and a new memory to take the place of the events before.

She stood in the middle of a long hallway, the walls in hexagonal structures with cross beams and large, plasmatic light fixtures running all along the walls. The structure shook and screeched with wear as the superstructure was shaken to its core. UNSC Marines, dressed in simple undershirts and dress pants rushed down the halls in loose formations one after the other. Opal noticed that they were much taller than her at this point, as if she were still a child. She realized that this was when she had only been a teenager when she was evacuated along with many other students from the UNSC Training Institute she had grown up at.

Some of the marines passing by appeared as if they had just experienced a quick, emergency thaw from cryogenic sleep. Some sported blistering skin from improper heating and some with bits of frost from lack of proper thawing processes. Nonetheless, they all held themselves high as they ran into battle, some shivering but trying their best to not look the part. Other Marines, already on duty, were rushing down the hallway in the other direction. Based on Opal's training at the Institute, away from the armory as they were in full gear and armed with MA5B LMG 5.56 Caseless and MA5C Heavy Carbine 7.62 Caseless. Their armor fully sealed and dressed in brown and green panels reflecting their origins as "Leathernecks." Overhead, light fixtures flickered, metal rumbled, emergency lights flashed, and exposed wires and broken panels sparked with loose electricity.

Somewhere nearby, a feminine voice of a Human Smart A.I called out orders. "Covenant Forces detected, all combat personnel report to active stations, ASAP. This is not a drill. Repeat the ship is now on Combat Alert-Alpha. Report to all active stations. Marines and Naval Combat Groups, prepare to engage boarders."

Opal ran following the unarmed troops to the armory. Dressed in her gray UNSC cadet uniform, she fell in line with the men that saved her only hours ago on a doomed planet.

Suddenly, a Marine Staff Sergeant walked up to her, his name tag identified him as Staff Sergeant Edward Buck. "Sorry little lady, but I can't have you running into firefights. Go find your friends, let us big boys handle it." He said as he waved for another marine already in full uniform. "Escort her to the Inner Shelters with the other Civvies and then return here for further orders." He stated and patted Opal's shoulder reassuringly. "Don't worry, we aren't going to lose."

"Yes sir, we won't. The Sergeant never lies!" The marine, a Corporal Jason Kelli, stated in a gruff voice that sounded not so reassuring but did a little to calm the young Opal from her already frantic attitude.

She wasn't afraid to die, she had been prepared to fight the Covenant since she had been born. She didn't understand why they wouldn't let her fight now, she had been trained after all for a good part of her childhood. She followed the Corporal anyway.

"Raven Vacuum-rated Combat Craft are launched, Operation Crow Knife commencing. Targeting Covenant Cruiser Alpha-3, prepare for counter operations, Marines." The A.I said over the intercom.

Opal followed the Corporal as groups of soldiers ran down the hallways and crew members moving deeper into the bowels of the structure of the warship.

Around several bleak and seemingly confusing twists and turns, the pair reached a service pathway, one of the lesser used secondary tunneling systems that ran throughout the ship that was used if the main halls became embattled, breached, or had to be flushed of an atmosphere. The structure system was a unique development singled out for only ships that were or exceeded 900 meters to a kilometer. Pretty much Cruisers and bigger.

The ship continued to rock and echo with strike after strike against the superstructure, the echoes here were dull and barely noted but they were there.

The two entered a new area that looked similar to the main hexagonal path that she had only escaped seconds ago, the Corporal led her without a word over to a large door to a large room with doors. It wasn't a barracks but it was simply a large extensive storage room that had been repurposed for refugees. The crates that lined the walls and around the blocks of rebar that held the structure together had been reinforced to the walls and structures. Some crates were open for access to the civilians in the room, there were several cots, tables, chairs, and dozens of sleeping bags and several Navy units in combat gear on guard duty around the civvies.

Based on Opal's estimate, including her class survivors that had found a corner and were silently waiting for something to happen with bored or horrified looks in their eyes as they jerked almost comedic at every single jolt that shook the room, the civilians were in a slightly better shape as they weren't used to combat and seemed to believe the several layers of metal would protect them from the vacuum and plasma outside the ship's structure, there were upwards 300 people in this very room. That did not include the probable numbers of more refugees in the storage room-converted into civilian bunkers.

The Corporal patted the young girl on the shoulder reassuringly and gave her a push into the room. Opal turned to face him as she walked into the room. She stopped. The Corporal nodded to her, gave her a salute and said, "Ma'am, we appreciate your willing to sacrifice, but you are our greatest treasure, you children, the next generation, don't put your lives at risk. Let us wasted meat take the heat. We'll be fine, we've done it before and we'll do it again. Don't worry, I'll be back."

The Corporal turned and started to sprint back to the frontlines of the Ship's superstructure near the surface. His boots echoed down the hall and disappeared as the voices of the frantic and hushed civilians overtook the noises from out in the hall. Opal went to sit with the other survivor kids from her UNSC Primary Education Institute, one boy probably in his later teens, nearly drafting age took a fresh blanket from one of the bins and wrapped it around Opal who gave a silent but gracious thanks with an eye contact and the movement of the mouth.

The boy nodded and went to check on another boy her age, likely his little brother due to the resemblance. Opal turned around and quickly imagined that Corporal, Jason Kelli, coming back around the corner bloodied and bruised but happy and cheerful and telling her everything was alright and the battle was over and they had survived, but no man came, not a single person turned that corner to come back and tell her that everything had gone well. Now or later. That door remained ajar and left unattended by a missing Corporal.

Opal had not realized at that time, she never thought of the possibility of that man never coming back, she had thought his promise could not be broken but how naïve she had been.

A slow monotone voice echoed over the speakers as Opal's mind simply

dangled like goo and kept her eyes focused on that door waiting for the man that had led her here and waiting for him to tell her that everything had been fine. "Covenant forces have breached on Level Sierra, all available combat units on Level Sierra, engage on contact.

The man's face in the memory of Opal's mind had come and gone, by the end of the second day, his face was but a hazy gray occasionally filled in by that of another person that appeared to share his compassion in later life. Opal never forgot his name. Jason Kelli.

It wasn't until years later did she get access to the ONI files of the battle that occurred onboard the Halcyon-class Cruiser, UNSCS Norfolk, that she found out that Corporal Jason Kelli, UNSC Marines, had fallen in battle only 23 minutes and 18 seconds after he had delivered her and made his promise to Opal that he would return.

He had fallen in battle for her sake and the realization hit her like a ton of bricks. Her mind however wandered again, still giving her no time to get a grip of the situation as she watched the memories change through the bleak dust of her mind.

Another memory awoke upon her conscious. One of silence, one of a skeleton stiffness. The memory was relatively recent, a feed of orders that had brought her to her current objectives that could possibly make History or bring upon Humanity another extinction-level event.

In front of her was a Rear Admiral Amar Akanksa, a leading figure among Admiral Osman's inner circle of Section III at ONI. He was the leading commander of the Prowler Corps and was the direct liaison of ONI to the UNSC Air Force, one of the lesser known branches of the UNSC. However, unlike many of the Prowler Corps enlisted officers, he was older than the criteria required of ONI prowler captains holding an age of 58.

He was of Hindi descent and had shaved his head showing off the seemingly waxed and shining sphere that was his skull. His ONI grey, work uniform was loose on his form and he gave off a sense of humble confidence behind a mask of kindness and modesty, however, many that knew the man could see through him at his blood-thirsty and arrogant conscious, if anyone could hold a grudge for decades, it was this man.

Currently, he had his sailor hat sitting on the side of his arm chair aboard the UNSCS Words of Infamy, the second Project Rotten Sneaker-class vessel, an ONI stealth cruiser, its sister ship, the Point of No Return.

Sitting next to him at the conference table aboard the Infamy's Faraday Cage was Opal who was receiving her newest assignment following a week of shore leave for her and her ship's crew.

The Loki's Will had been deployed to the Brute Homeworld to investigate the Elite's security measures on keeping the Brutes from returning to power, the prowler, a Sahara-class Prowler was only as big as some of the UNSC Air Force's liquid-surface combatants and submarines. The crew narrowly escaped discovery by the Sangheili Armed Forces, the SAF's Stealth Corvettes with similar capabilities

of the UNSC prowlers. The mission had occurred before due to the Elites' unwillingness to allow Humans to have a look at what the Elites claimed was a former Covenant matter and simply assured that the "Apes" would never be able to retaliate from their world again.

Now, Opal was watching the Rear Admiral before her silently swirled his brownish drink that bubbled with the stirring spoon; Opal assumed it was coffee.

"Captain McKinley, you and the Loki's Will are to deploy to the Ross 128 System in 72 hours, there you will arrive at these coordinates." The Rear Admiral stated and handed Opal a data pad with information on the mission.

"They are the sight of an unknown alien artifact that was discovered back in 2438 and has been labeled by the UNSC's Office of Interstellar Navigation as a danger zone due to lack of habitable planets and lack of anything of notability for the public. The only planet in this system is the gas giant, Sulis, after the Celtic goddess of Bath. The artifact appears to be encased in an icy asteroid grouping or what is left of a frozen comet in the star system that orbits Sulis. I have a feeling you'll know what you're looking for when you get there."

"Sir, what do you want us to do after?" Opal asked with a business-like seriousness.

"Contact ONI headquarters at Earth and relay your findings, after making contact with the UNSC destroyer, the Alexander, its captain is a competent man but he has a history of being suspicious of the Office, ignore his behavior and order him to the Ross 128 system, tell him his services are required of ONI; following his arrival activate the artifact and pass through it. Read the official report for more details, the point of this is to test the UNSC's abilities in logistics and capabilities against unknown targets. I do not know what you will find on the other side but I want you to record all the events that occur on the other side and if things go too well, cripple the Alexander and let the enemy have at them, if that does not work, take appropriate contingencies. We don't need the public knowing of our meddling with soldiers' lives. The Office is already under scrutiny for the publicized and leaked information of activities during the War, we don't need this to become public as it will jeopardize ONI and if ONI is compromised, Humanity is compromised. Read through the notes, I expect a full report on the events when you get back. Any questions?"

"Yes, sir. How do you know if there will be enemies on the other side? You said this was an unknown artifact, what do you mean this could compromise Humanity, we're the only state moderately recovered from the war, we are unmatched." Opal asked confused without showing too much of emotion.

"The report will explain everything you need to know, look specifically at the date of February 27, 2529; you'll understand well once you've seen it. Your ship is receiving refits for your mission as well, as we speak. Also, we cannot let this go public because it could very well topple our good control over Human Space, this wretched new administration has been slowly and efficiently chipping away at our vigilance. Stupid, cheeky, little Progressive Bastards of

the UCE government are slowly privatizing our abilities and its happening as we speak right under our dear Director's nose and soon enough we won't be ready for the next war we fight. This isn't going to end well, mark my words, Captain! You're dismissed, I expected you back within the next week." He stood up took a sip of the drink, and lazily saluted his subordinate before asking, "You want some coffee?"

"No sir, thank you sir. I'll get the job done." Opal replied and stood and saluted sharply dropped the honorific and posture and marched out of the room and began her long walk along all the long, extensive security check points back out of the ship. Her mind and eyes deeply focused on the data pad full of special information secured solely for the mission ahead. The memory fizzled and the vision faded to black before returning to that of the reality.

The Slipspace stream echoed across the polarized bridge window of the Prowler. Opal noticed she was now sitting and had unconsciously moved from a standing to sitting position on her arm chair in the center of the shrunken bridge of the Prowler. She stood up and stretched her limbs then looked toward the A.I pedestal, she spoke, "Romanji. Give me access to the closest real-time recordings of the Sulis Asteroid Belt Region and the Colony of Aragon. Put them on the central screen."

A moment later a simple set of video feeds appeared on two large monitors. The Japanese-styled Avatar of the A.I was nowhere to be seen or heard. Opal watched the video play out of events that supposedly occurred nearly 30 minutes ago. The first screen was almost spotless except for the magnificent gas giant, Sulis in the background and a highlighted cluster of asteroids near the equator at the Southern quadrant of the Asteroid Belt's Sulis-based orbit. The video feed was uneventful. The second screen, however showed massive battles occurring in space, not reflecting the probably even more drastic surface battle occurring on the lush green planet of Aragon below. The Alexander, a Sun Tzu-class Destroyer, nearly 4 times bigger than the Will following its "upgrades."

"Romanji, take these images to my personal office, I need to catch some shut eye, contact me when we have exited Slipspace or an accident has occurred. XO Miles, you have the bridge."

"Yes, m' lady." The A.I stated without appearing.

"Yes, ma'am." Commander Joseph Miles stated as he took the seat that Opal had just recently occupied.

Opal scrubbed her tired eyes with both hands and headed for the hallway and the quartering deck where she could possibly get some shut eye. She pressed a panel on the door at the aft section of the bridge. She took one last glance of the endless expanse of Slipspace and shook her head. She opened the door as it slid to the side and she walked into the bowels of the Loki's Will and to the coming bliss of rest as her eyes grew heavy with sleep.

The door slide behind her with a hiss and the bridge sight was no more, now in the hands of a competent commander rather than the fatigued Captain. The time for Requiem was over, in a few hours, the meeting of Alexander and Loki shall begin. A dance between the Ghost and the General.

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"_Semper Vigilans" _â€" official motto of the UNSC Office of Naval Intelligence, circa 2405-onward. Meaning "Always Vigilant."

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Take note this chapter is shorter than others, maintaining a 10,000 words per chapter rate is nearly impossible for my schedule. Thanks again.

End
file.